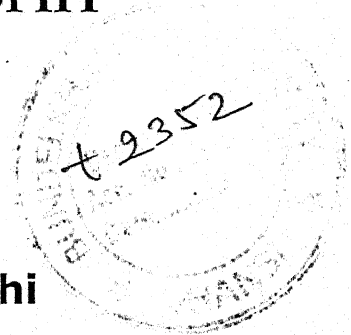


**THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF
ANNE SEXTON AND KAMALA DAS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**A THESIS
SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**IN
ENGLISH**

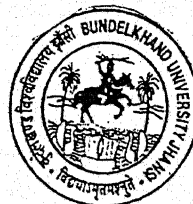
**By
Krishna Kant Awasthi
M.A.**



Under

**Supervisor
Dr. R.K. Misra
M.A. (Phil. & Eng.)
Ph.D., D. Litt.
Former Reader in English
D.B.S. College
Kanpur**

**Co-Supervisor
Dr. Mahendra Singh
M.A., Ph.D.
Reader, Dept. of English
V.S.S.D. College
Kanpur**



To

**Bundelkhand University Jhansi
2005**

D.B.S. (POST GRADUATE) College, Kanpur

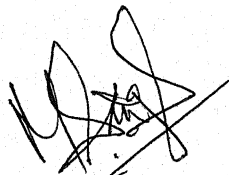
R.K. Mishra

**M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.
Reader (Retd.)
Department of English**

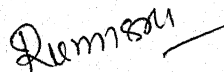
**Phone: 2280545
Res: 553, Ratan Lal Nagar
Kanpur**

Certificate

This is to certify that Mr. Krishna Kant Awasthi has completed his research work "The confessional poetry of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das: A Comparative Study" under our supervision. He has put in the attendance of more than two hundred days, required by the Bundelkhand University Ordinances. The thesis submitted by him is original and has not been submitted in part or whole to any other university for a diploma or degree.



**Dr. Mahendra Singh
Co-Supervisor**



**Dr. R.K. Misra
Supervisor**

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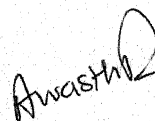
Acknowledgement

My foremost thanks are due to my supervisor Dr. R.K. Misra and Co-supervisor Dr. Mahendra Singh but for whose benevolent and inspiring guidance this thesis would not have been completed. I am also indebted to Mrs. Shobha Misra and Dr. (Mrs.) Krishna Thakur for their encouragement. I express my gratitude to Dr. R.K. Tripathi as well for his help and inspiration.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Principal, Dr. N.D. Samadhia, the Librarian and the staff of D.V. College, Orai, my research centre and Mr. R. Misra, the Librarian of the Central Library, I.I.T. Kanpur and his staff for permitting me to use the library. At the same time I would like to record my obligations to Mr. P. Singh, Instrumentation Engineer, I.I.T. Kanpur for helping me in the collection of the required material. Thanks are also due to Mr. J.P. Sharma for the flawless typing the manuscript.

At his occasion I express my thankfulness to my parents, Sri Ravi Narayan Awasthi, and Smt. Bitani Devi, to my brother Shri Kamala Kant Awasthi, sister-in-law Smt. Reeta Awasthi, and to my father-in-law Shri Ram Dayal Tiwari and mother-in-law Smt. Uma Devi Tiwari. I'll be failing in my duty if I do not thank my wife Mrs. Pritama Awasthi and my little ones Abha and Piyush who stood with me during these difficult years and did everything to remove the burden and tension which a research work invariably involves.

In the end I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to authors, whose ideas and language I have used consciously or unconsciously.



Krishna Kant Awasthi

Preface

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are manifestly two of the most luminous stars of the twentieth century poetic firmament. They illumine not only the aesthetic sky of their respective countries but also that of the whole world. Interestingly in their literary adventure both of them are inspired by a common ideal that bind them to a close kinship. From every angle, historical, social, and literary, they reflect a world of common experience with its peculiar beauty and ugliness, fascination and repulsion, and above all weal and woe. Differences of country, climate, historical and cultural legacies notwithstanding, they share a language of psychic maladies, social protest, and religious experience that voice their aims and aspirations. With their literary efforts, they go on to shock the whole human community by their unorthodox utterances and to champion the cause of women.

Obviously the poetic credo of Sexton and Das involves new thematic and formal patterns. Both of them participate in the modern movements in literature which rose against the lifeless and dull musing of the poetry of Modernism. Abandoning the objective poetry of indirection, they developed a new poetry of direct and personal experience. Thematically some poets like Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Theodore Roethke, Berryman, and Randall Jarrell, placed their literal self at the centre of their poems and revelled in expressing their own private humiliations, suffering, and psychological problems like complex manic depressions, madness, suicidal tendencies etc. For poetic themes they milked their own consciousness. At the same time some female poets like Anne Sexton, Sylvia

Plath, and Judith Wright went a step further as they focussed on their naked female self, revealing not only the mysteries of the inner self but also details peculiar to the female experience of extremely erotic nature. In this way they became daring enough to give vent to the taboo subjects, risking their physical and mental health, social prestige, and disturbing social harmony. These poets, male as well as female, thus considerably enlarged the range of poetry with the inclusion of the ugly, the repulsive, the forbidden, the inhibited, and the taboo subjects.

For poetizing new themes, they had to develop a new poetics radically different from the one dominating the contemporary poetic scene. Eventually they drew inspiration from a tradition of confession popular in ancient poetry, religion, and psychiatry. They fell back on an old poetic form used by Sappho, Catullus, and Augustine and continued by Rousseau, Baudelaire, Rilke and Whitman. However, with their tremendous skill these poets developed this method into a perfect literary medium, capable of digging the buried elements of obsession, guilt, and psychological complexes, expressing the rise and fall of human moods, cycles and climates of the human body, and transcendental longings. In their hands, especially in the hands of Sexton, this mode, which is designated as confessional mode, realized its immense promise. She perfected the mode, investing it with universality and transcendence with the introduction of literary techniques of highest order.

What Anne Sexton endeavoured to accomplish in America, Kamala Das did in India. Sexton's poetic mission was shared by Kamala Das. She also opted for taboo subjects of her legitimate and illegitimate sex life, revealing the

innermost secrets of the female body, its convulsions, its hungers, and its waywardness and aberrations. Like Sexton she blends the confessions of her leaky self with a language of social protest which voices her concern for the female tribe and other suppressed sections of society. However, neither her confessional theme nor her confessional mode is simple. Both of them betray a complexity, which comes from the use of literary devices, in laying bare the life of the hidden self. Interestingly as a social and literary experience, Das' poetry runs parallel to Sexton's, in spite of differences in their outlook and cultural background.

The comparative study of Sexton and Das, who are unquestionably two of the best exponents of the modern female consciousness under psychic stress and female compulsions, is revealing as well as rewarding. However, like any other comparative study, it has its own problems, which invariably stem from the difference of their social and cultural backgrounds. Even though they exemplify a similar pattern of life, involved in similar types of humiliations, sex experiences, suicidal tendencies, attacks of mental diseases, they possessed a different mentality. Hence we are bound to find in their works similarities as well as differences of some or the other kind. In the following pages our effort would be to treat poetic affinities and differences in an objective and impartial manner.

Since our study is of a specific nature, dealing only with the confessional aspect of the poetry of Sexton and Das, we would focus our attention on the characteristic qualities only of their confessional poetry and present a comparative analysis, pinpointing their excellences and limitations. These focal points include the definition of confessional poetry as the poetry of the leaky or the buried self

and the poetry celebrating human body, especially female body with a mixture of reality and imagination. Considering the role of irony, understatement, paradoxes, metonymy, and many such devices, we are to evaluate the part played by symbolism and imagery to shape the confessional mode as an instrument of power. We have also to discuss the religious and the transcendental aspects of this mode. These are precisely the points of reference which would serve as our guiding principles. However, in view of its limited scope, the study is neither exhaustive nor complete. It has all the defects of a beginner. Nevertheless, it is a sincere effort to evaluate Sexton and Das as confessional poets.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The modern form of Confessional poetry was one of the chief channels of modern creative consciousness of the English speaking world. It dominated the poetic scene of America and the Commonwealth countries, especially during the third quarter of the twentieth century. It produced such stalwarts as Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Stanley Kunitz in America and Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Judith Wright, and Margaret Atwood in the Commonwealth countries. It also inspired such poets as Allen Ginsberg, Karl Shapiro, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Jerome Mazzaro, William Heyen, Barbara Harr, and Randall Jarrell. However, the most representative poets of this genre are undoubtedly Anne Sexton and Kamala Das, since their poetry embodies the most distinctive elements of the confessional mode. Naturally Anne has been regarded as "the reigning high priestess of the confessional school"¹ and Kamala Das no less, since "she also exploited the mode like Plath and Sexton."²

These confessional poets wrote a number of widely acclaimed and national and international prize-winning works, including such masterpieces as The Lost Son (1948), Life Studies (1959), Heart's Needle (1959), To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), All My Pretty Ones (1962), The Far Field (1964), Dream Songs (1964), Ariel (1965), Live or Die (1966), The Testing Tree (1971), Summer in

Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Power Politics (1971), etc. Among these books, those of Anne Sexton, especially To Bedlam and Part Way Back and Live or Die, and Das, especially The Descendants and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems are conspicuous, since they outshine the works of other poets in the use of this complex mode.

Confessional poetry was the typical product of the circumstances peculiar to the second half of the twentieth century, especially the post-war reactionary tendencies surfacing in the social, cultural, and literary realms of America. As the typical product of the age, it captured the mood of the contemporary world, its frustration and disillusionment, its priorities and problems, its aspirations and inhibitions as well as its exposures and disclosures. It voiced the predicaments of a generation which was caught in a double mood of reaction and retention or continuity, reaction against the established order and continuity of the romantic values of self-expression. Tremendously shaken by social and political upheavals as well as cultural revolutions and fed up with the politics of cold war and military pacts, the generation strongly reacted against the prevalent cults of massification, and reductionism, and big business which reduced men into non-entities. In literary realm too, people of the generation became impatient with the conventions of Modernism which stood for collective mind and impersonality.

But much at the same time, the generation aspired to retain the lessons of the new science, especially psychology and biology which threw fresh light on human behaviour. It continued to evince keen interest in the findings of Freud's disciples like Jung and Lacan. The generation was tremendously fascinated by the

works of Alfred Kinsley, especially in his books Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female (1953). It became also attentive to researches in biology that revealed not only the inner working of the mind but brought in the lime-light the beauties and banalities of human body as well. In literature it aspired to adhere to the subjective streak and direct expression to unlock the secrets of the inner world and the outer world alike. While discarding Modernist conventions, they endorsed the poetics of Postmodernism.

People, especially the poets reacted against Modernism, because they found it redundant and outdated, unable to cope with the growing problems of life and demands of self-expression. The Modernists emphasized tradition, objectivity, and anonymity against individuality, subjectivity, and personalism. They urged that an author's personality and life should not find place in his writings. They excluded the personal element because they wanted to rid the poetry of biographical excesses and the romantic obsession with personality – an obsession which diverts attention from the central subject, i.e. the poem.

Although with a new Eliotic "orientation towards human experience and towards its expression in language,"³ Modernist poetics was able to evolve effective modes to deal with modern experience of frustration, disillusionment, sterility, alienation, and the erosion of human values caused by the invasion of an industrial civilization, the impact of the great War and its aftermath, and the researches in psycho-analysis. Eliot, the high priest of Modernism, made a concerted effort to revive man's contact with the springs of joy. He described with gusto the Unreal City with its dirt, aridity, and shoddiness, its vulgarities and

falsities in a highly allusive and resonant style. He exposed the impatience and cheap quackery of modern values by putting them against richness and ancient faith, art, and humanity. Eliot contrasted the sterility of the contemporary world with the glories of romance and the world of the great saints, the teachers, and the creative artists. He also brought into relief the beauty and the splendour of the world of Nature.

In his effort to bring poetry close to the rhythms of modern life, Eliot was helped by Yeats, Pound, Stevens, Williams, and Moore. Emphasizing tradition, objectivity, and anonymity against individuality, subjectivity, and personalism, they produced "a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony and wit."⁴ They excluded the personal element because they wanted to purify poetry from subjectivism and personal extremism. Obviously the Modernist stance provided concepts to interpret and forms to articulate the experience of the War-ravaged landscape of 1920's. But it was not able to give vent to the experience of coming generations. The Modernist poetics of objectivity and impersonality was not adequately armed to explore the recesses of mind of 1950's and subsequent decades. Besides, the theories propounded by Modernist critics also tended to constrain the free flow of imaginative energy.

With the failure of Modernist poetic conventions, poets began to move away from the standards set by John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Yvor Winters. In 1959, Robert Lowell, a staunch follower of Eliot, wrote Life Studies in which he abandoned traditional metres and highly wrought diction for freer forms and colloquial language. Theodore Roethke also explored more open forms. Both

Lowell and Roethke and the poets who followed them did not escape from personality but into personality. They cultivated their own inwardness as material for poetry or to look for the immediacies of their own situation from valid experience. Discarding their faith in tradition and systematization, they sought personal modes of expression to embody their own perceptions and intuitions. Besides, they did not try to interpret their mystical experience in the framework of tradition. Renouncing their faith in myths, natural or religious, they returned to secure haven of autobiography.

The poets of new consciousness invited their readers to share in their "pursuit of identity to witness the dramatization of the daily events of [their] experience."⁵ They also urged them to inculcate the imagery of their dreams and to swim in the flowing stream of consciousness. The new poet asked people "to absorb the shock of [their] deep-seated fears and neuroses, even mental instability and madness, and through them to realize the torments of our time..."⁶

The Postmodern poets, like the adherents of Modernism, revived Romanticism. But their focal points were different. While the poets of Modernism were inspired by the poetics of Coleridge, the poets of Postmodernism expressed their faith in the early Wordsworth who conceived of a poet, as a man speaking to man without impediments. His conception was faithfully followed by Lowell, Roethke, Sexton, Logan, Snyder, O'Hara, Levertov et al. Influenced by surrealism, expressionism, and Chinese and Japanese poetry, they found their precursors in Whitman, Williams, Hart Crane, and poets of European and Latin American countries.

Besides new psychology and Wordsworthian romanticism, there was yet another factor which boosted confessional poetry. It was the radical feminist movement, which made great noise in the Continent as well as in the States. Championing the cause of woman's rights in a male-dominated society, it also stood for rescuing the woman-poet from her, what Suzanne Juhasz defined as the "double-bind situation, one of conflict and strain."⁷ This movement went a long way to inspire at least women confessional poets, including Sexton and Kamala Das to write like women and reveal the mysteries of the female body. Sexton became intent, as Jane McCabe writes, "on finding ways to think and feel about the female body in heterosexual, homosexual, even onanistic contexts."⁸ In India, as Kamala Das tells Iqbal Kaur, it was not as "noisy as it has been in the West," it appeared only as "a very quiet revolt."⁹ Nevertheless, it influenced many Indian women writers including Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, and Tara Patel.

Thus Postmodernism, new psychology, and to some extent the feminist movement combined to produce a new genre of modern poetry which revived old mode to avoid the strict formalism and impersonality of Modernism and thus assured a new era of personal poetry in America. The term "confessional" in its present form has been most probably used for the first time by M.L. Rosenthal. In 1967, he wrote: "The term 'confessional poetry' came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959." He further remarked that "because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and

psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate enough."¹⁰

However, neither the term 'confessional' nor the 'confessional mode' of poetic expression is new. Both of them have an ancient origin. Before taking up the history of the terms, 'confession' and 'confessionalism,' let us understand how they are understood in common usage. The word 'confession' is derived from the verb 'to confess,' which means to acknowledge or to admit. It has a religious connotation as well as it denotes a Catholic practice in which a guilty person confesses his or her guilt before the Father Confessor in the Church and also prays for forgiveness. The word 'confessional' refers to the place where confession is made. It is precisely in this sense, that Oxford Dictionary defines it as "a private place... in a church where a priest sits to hear confessions."¹¹

Moreover, in the Catholic circles, the practice of making confession was clearly purgative and therapeutic, as its aim was to unburden one's conscience and to rest in peace. For nearly, fifteen hundred years, the priest and the church continued to give relief to the guilty, the morally isolated, and the disturbed psyche. But as the influence of the church waned, people turned to other means of confession. In Protestantism, 'Confession' required a secular mode and people were encouraged to write diaries and memoirs to make some sort of confession. From religion, the term 'confession' was adopted by the psychiatrist. While trying to ascertain the cause of a patient's neurosis, the doctor made him to confess or to narrate the incident's, causing his abnormal state of mind. By the process of self-analysis, the psychiatrist helps the patient to purge his buried experiences.

Confessionalism thus became a process of therapy in which a patient recounted and recalled his or her past experiences to get rid of them.

From religion and psychiatry, the practice of confession crept into modern literature when some mentally disturbed poets, specially Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were encouraged to poetize their experiences of, what the psychiatrist defines as the "leaky ego" or the experiences, buried in their unconscious. Poetry became a therapy, which removed the dead self and facilitated the birth of a new self. Confessionalism as a poetic mode has also an ancient background. It was used by Sappho as early as the sixth century B.C. In Sappho, we can find certain startling lines like, "why am I crying?/ Am I still sad/ because of my lost maidenhood?"¹² According to Robert Phillips, in these lines Sappho "outsextons sexton."¹³ Sappho was followed by Catullus, a poet of later classical times. More than two thousand years ago, Catullus wrote about personal suffering, "I hate and love/ And if you ask me why,/ I have no answer, but I discern/ can feel, my senses rooted in eternal torture."¹⁴ St. Augustine also accepted the mode to articulate the afflictions of his inner life. In our own times John Berryman gave us an existential version of soul's inner life. Earlier in the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote his great poem Confessions with echoes from Augustine. Rousseau's poem was followed by the confessions of De Quincey, Musset, Chateaubriand, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Rilke et al. In America it was Walt Whitman whose "Calamus" poems were highly confessional.

However, confessional poetry which existed only as an occasional formal phenomenon developed into a powerful poetic mode. Taking cue from the Catholic

tradition, Baudelaire, Rilke, and Whitman as also from his disciples like Snodgrass and Sexton, Robert Lowell launched the confessional school of poetry, which gradually became one of the most powerful and popular poetic modes of the contemporary period. In Britain, Thomas Hardy wrote something like confessional poetry in 1912-1913, which is full of the regrets of wasted life and lost opportunities.

In America, however, there is a little confusion regarding the real originator of the confessional mode in its present form. The credit is generally given to Robert Lowell. Nevertheless, according to Robert Lowell himself, the credit must go to W.D. Snodgrass. "He (Snodgrass) did these things before I did, though he's younger than I am and had been my student. He may have influenced me, though people have suggested the opposite."¹⁵ Anne Sexton also acknowledges her debt to W.D. Snodgrass, who showed her how to dare to be true. But there are some facts to suggest that the real progenitor was Anne Sexton. Before writing his Life Studies, Robert Lowell had the benefit of reading some of the poems of Sexton's first Volume To Bedlam and Part Way Back, including "You, Doctor Martin," and "Music Swims Back to Me." It is on record that Sexton had sent these poems to Lowell for advice. Undoubtedly, by that time she had "almost finished" her first book To Bedlam and Part Way Back.¹⁶ Likewise she had also written half of her first book before reading W.D. Snodgrass's Heart's Needle. She makes this fact quite clear in her interview with Patricia Marx, as she says:

I had written about half of my first book when I read that poem, and it moved me to such an extent – it's about a child, and he has to give up his child, which seem to be one of my themes, and I didn't have

my own daughter at that time – that I ran up to my mother-in-law's where she was living and got her back. I could only keep her at that time for a week, but the poem moved me to action. It so changed me, and undoubtedly it must have influenced my own poetry. At the time everyone said, "You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional: you can't write this, Anne," and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission.¹⁷

From this statement, it is evident that she was writing in confessional mode before Snodgrass's Heart's Needle and Robert Lowell's Life Studies. Hence, the credit to start the confessional mode should rest with Anne Sexton. But it cannot be denied that she was influenced by a number of other confessional poets, including her great contemporaries. For instance she was influenced by Robert Lowell's allusiveness, W.D. Snodgrass's lyricism, and Sylvia Plath's expressionism. Other American poets to influence her were mainly Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and William Carlos Williams. Among foreign poets, she was fascinated by Rilke, Rimbaud, Lawrence, and Pavlov Neruda.

Confessionalism seized the imagination of the contemporary poets. More and more poets came forwards to write in personal mode. Allen Ginsberg was already writing in the first person. He published Howl as early as 1956 or before. Theodore Roethke also switched over to the confessional mode. Later it was adopted by Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Karl Shapiro, Denise Levertov, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Jerome Mazzaro, William Heyen, Barbara Harr, and Randall Jarrell as well. These poets produced masterpieces, many of which won Pulitzer prizes and National Book Awards. With their presence on the poetic scene there was an unprecedented upsurge in poetic activity, so much so

that in only a decade extending from 1959 to 1966, we saw the publication of many books which eventually became classics.

The contemporary confessional poetic mode is not without its distinctive features. It is a mode which incorporates the best elements of poetry. It, like any other poetic form, explores truth, works as an instrument of personal and social good, and yields an aesthetic pleasure. Beyond the traditional norms, confessional poetry has personal elements as its core, an element which it shares with other contemporary forms which emerged as a reaction against the elements of impersonality, anonymity, and rationality of the Modernists' art.

As the portraits of the erring and passionate selves, confessional poetry is a poetry with a vision, distinctive themes, a common tone, and a common disclaimer to veracity. It expresses without inhibition, its open emotions in a literary manner and in an open language. However, in its anti-establishment mood, it creates a sensational poetry which lacks both form and substance. But in its serious aspect, it touches the heights of religious and mystic experience. To elaborate, in its most distinctive form confessional poetry is an autobiography of the self in its multifarious roles. Without putting barriers between self and self-expression, it covers an untrammelled poetic ground, which is something unprecedented in the aesthetic realm.

The confessional poets, in their mythologies of self, exhibit an openness of emotions, which are their stock-in-trade of poetry, in a language, which is mostly colloquial. However, their ordinary language is not without artifice, since it takes recourse to poetic devices like irony and understatement.

Even though confessional poets pretend to tell us the naked truth of human life, they artfully enliven it with fanciful interludes. But surprisingly, even after successfully cultivating a common vision, common themes, a common tone, and a common disclaimer to veracity, they could not develop a common form. Nevertheless, even without a well defined structural form and elegant mode of expression, they developed the confessional mode into the most powerful medium capable of expressing the frustration of the contemporary world, including the experience of alienation. Exposing themselves to the perils of self-probing, and risking their sanity, the confessional poets penetrated to the heart of the inner darkness, achieving transcendence and universalism suffused with mystic experience. Their poetry which once seemed only the cries of an agonised heart assumed the form of revelations of the highest truth.

Obviously, self is the "sole poetic symbol"¹⁸ of confessional poetry. Although confessional poets are attentive to the multifarious roles of the self, their focal point is the unconscious part of it. Their "total mythology," as Phillips writes, "is the lost self."¹⁹ One can find the best specimens of this lost self in Roethke's The Lost Son and Randall Jarrell's Losses and The Lost World. However, the confessional poets are not concerned with all the aspects of the buried self. Their choice as well as their angle of vision is specific. According to M.L. Rosenthal, they place their "literal self more and more at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization."²⁰ Therefore only the intimate aspect of life and private experiences become central to confessional poetry. Viewed from the

personal angle, a confessional poem, as A.R. Jones writes, becomes a "a dramatic monologue in which the persona's naked ego is involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences."²¹

However, these particular and private experiences narrated by confessional poets are not commonplace or ordinary. They are, as one would like to keep to oneself and will not expose to what Mills calls the "public sight."²² Most of these experiences are related to subjects considered taboo and are forbidden in art. These include childhood guilt, anguish, suffering, facts of the female body, divorce, suicide attempts, mental breakdowns, mental diseases like paranoia, schizophrenia, and many ugly and repulsive experiences, which are not at all conducive to aesthetic pleasure.

Obviously, the exploration and expression of the experiences of the buried self involves embarrassment and a certain feeling of disgrace. Hence it requires a certain amount of exemplary courage on the part of the poet to ventilate them. It is neither pleasant nor convenient to milk one's unconscious and to let the world know the filth of one's life. Anne Sexton's poetry embodies a lot of such filth, which includes "family skeletons out of the camphor balls – father's alcoholic tendencies, mother's inability to deal with her suicide attempts, great aunt in a straitjacket."²³ As Sexton confesses to Barbara Kelves that for voicing these painful facts she had to take "a certain courage."²⁴ Indeed, as Sexton told Patricia Marx, "[i]t's very hard to reveal oneself."²⁵ But let us remember that the courage of Sexton and for that matter the confessional poet, is not the courage of an insane or neurotic person but of one whose heart vibrates with supreme self confidence.

Kamala Das's confessionalism runs parallel to Anne Sexton's. She also speaks about the callousness of a her cruel, unsympathetic, and a money-minded husband, an unimaginative father, an indifferent mother, a loving grandmother, and the selfish lovers. Likewise, she tells us about her pain and embarrassment of self-disclosures. In the "Preface" of My Story she writes:

My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband. Why, I had even confessed that I was chronically falling in love with persons of flamboyant nature. When I went for a short vacation to my home state I received no warmth. In a hurry I escaped back to Bombay. This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not, for a moment, regret My Story has cost her fully dear but, as she says, she do not regret having written it.²⁶

Even though My Story caused many ruffles in her family and was also disgraceful to her friends and relatives, she did not feel perturbed but rather happy, as she wrote:

I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of My Story has given me.²⁷

This sort of exemplary courage and satisfaction generates a self-confidence and becomes one of the defining qualities of confessional poetry. It is evident from the statement of Allen Ginsberg:

Confessional poetry is born of self-confidence of someone who knows that he's really alive, and that his existence is just as good as any other subject matter.²⁸

However, in their autobiographies of self, the male and the female confessional poets adopt different attitude in their approach. While the male poet, assuming the stance of Everyman, raises his individual experience to social, and

for that matter, to universal level, the female poet has no such advantage. Her voice remains confined only to herself and goes on to augment only her sense of alienation. Supporting this idea, Deborah Pope writes:

In modern confessional poetry, as an extension of the Adamic tradition, the stance of Everyman is readily available to the male poet. It is expected that, personally alienated and desperate as his voice may be, it is still the voice of his time. By articulating the personal psychoses of his experience, he is simultaneously relaying the social fabric of his world. Yet, for the female confessional poet; there is not the same extension. She is not Everyman, and is hardly Everywoman. Her experience only serves to reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. She cannot even believe in a solidarity or community with other woman. Although in a very real sense male confessional poets do bespeak trauma of their times, poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton remain individual "crazy women."²⁹

Nevertheless, these "individual" crazy women also achieve a measure of universalism, especially when they dissect their physical bodies and probe the recesses of their souls and reveal truths open only to the great writers. By doing so, they achieve a greater self-understanding than their male counterparts. Anne Sexton tells us, in unambiguous terms, that the act of self-exposure, even though painful and embarrassing, is self-revealing:

It's very embarrassing for someone to expose their body to you. You don't learn anything from it. But if they expose their soul, you learn something that's true of great writers. They expose their souls and then suddenly, I am moved and I understand my life better.³⁰

Obviously, confessional poetry is not an exercise in futility or a poetry without purpose. It is meaningful, since the exploration of the unconscious self has a specific aim, personal as well as social. Following Franz Kafka, confessional poets believe that poetry is an instrument of self-exploration which melts the

frozen sea within our psyche. In her interview with Barbara Kelves, Sexton clearly states:

As Kafka said about prose, 'A book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.' And that's I want from a poem. A poem should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.³¹

The purpose of a confessional poem is to shock the senses and to hurt the self so that one may cultivate more awareness and become more alive to reality. A good poem cuts as an "ax." It cuts the frozen sea that is within us in the form of the unconscious. It breaks the surface and plunges us into deep insides and digs out our obsessions to bring them to surface and finally purges them away. All confessional art, writes Robert Phillips, "whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed."³² Viewed in this way, poetry is a therapy and an instrument of purgation. It assumes the role, previously reserved for the clergymen and the psychiatrists.

Kamala Das is also a poet with a purpose, individual as well as social. On the surface, her purpose is to shock Indians for their complacency and taboos, as she tells Iqbal Kaur: "I needed to disturb society out of its complacence. I found the complacence a very ugly state."³³ At bottom, it is purgation or catharsis, she candidly admits: "If I had not learnt to write how would I have written away my loneliness or grief? Garnering them within, my heart would have grown heavy as a vault, one that only death might open, a release then I would not be able to feel

or sense.”³⁴ Elsewhere she writes: “I took up writing, hoping that it would help the volcano within to explode in a slow orderly way.”³⁵

As mentioned earlier, along with personal therapy: confessional poetry also aims at social therapy. It gives solace not only to the poet but also to the reader, especially to one who suffers from mental diseases. We can recall Dr. Martin’s prophetic statement to Sexton: “Your poems might mean something to someone else someday.”³⁶ Kamala Das, as Niranjan Mohanti states, deals with “the longer issues of life lying beyond the cocooned self.”³⁷ Another eminent scholar, S.D. Sharma, also underlines the cathartic effect of Kamala’s poetry, when he states that “the more poignant her confessional tone is, the more is her cathartic import.”³⁸

Interestingly, confessional poets write the autobiographies of their untrammelled but naked self in a new metaphor and in a new form, discarding the Eliotic convention of finding objective correlatives for mental states and adopting the technique of direct statement. “The language of the confessional poem is that of ordinary speech, whether in blank verse, rhymed or no.”³⁹ It is colloquial language with which the poets get close to the realities of life. Nevertheless, in their quest for ordinary language they are not extremists like Ginsberg and Sappho who come perilously close to obscenity. Both Sexton and Das take recourse to the plain and ordinary idiom of colloquial language which is close to the realities of human life. They adopt the conversational tone of simple people, using a simple diction.

The openness of language enables confessional poets to cultivate openness of emotion. “Generations of poets had censored their feelings, filtering them

through screens of 'tough' language."⁴⁰ Many of them were afraid of giving vent to their emotion. Modernism stifled the emotional aspect of poetic sensibility. However, confessional poetry comes on to restore the emotional life of the protagonist, making it "their stock-in-trade."⁴¹ Sexton too presents an unabashed picture of her emotional life, hiding nothing from her readers. Likewise Das gives a free and flowing expression to her feelings and emotions so much so that her poems appear as the outcries of her emotional life, manifest in her different roles as a woman.

However, confessional poetry of open language, open emotions, and direct or autobiographical statements is not as simple as it seems to be. It is complex and artful, as it skilfully uses a number of poetic devices. Confessional poets pretend to make simple and direct statements of facts from the unconscious just like a researcher or a reporter. Their renderings sound like the case history of a neurotic. However, this notion is far from truth. Confessional poets disguise art in their simple statements, as they make a subtle use of such poetic techniques as irony, selection, invention, imagery, rhythm, and understatement, to produce a poetic effect.

Interestingly, though pretending to make direct and factual statements, confessional poets press into service such creative faculties as fancy and imagination. Subsequently their poetry becomes a blending of fact and fiction, a blending of reality and imagination. Marjorie Perloff points out that "Confessional poetry fuses the romantic with the realistic mode."⁴² Likewise, Robert Lowell finds the "[s]uperb manipulation of the realistic convention"⁴³ in the confessional

craftsmanship involved in her confessional writing. For his manipulations, she goes on to call the poet even a "liar" and a "crook" because he shifts and distorts the facts of his own life and manipulates them in order to produce an emotional effect. She makes a difference between the literal truth and the factual truth. She invariably criticizes literal truth if it mars the emotional effect. Anne Sexton explains how she had manipulated facts in her poem "The Double Image."⁴⁴

Like Sexton, Das also exploits literary devices like irony, selection, invention, imagery, rhythm, and understatement to create poetic effect. Indeed she excelled in the use of irony and understatement. "No other Indian English poet," writes Sharad Rajimwale, "employed irony to such devastating effect before Kamala Das – it is caustic, it is Virginian, it is profoundly demolishing. It evokes both pity and anger, sympathy and ire."⁴⁵ Much in the same way, Das also blends facts with fancy in order to make her autobiography My Story interesting or rather sensational. Naturally Devindra Kohli believes that her Story is "partly contrived."⁴⁶

Surprisingly, in spite of having common themes, a common vision, a common tone, and "a common disclaimer to veracity,"⁴⁷ confessional poetry lacks a common form. In order to render their experience confessional poets use different forms. For instance, while delineating the theme of madness Robert Lowell uses free verse, whereas Anne Sexton prefers strict forms of the traditional poetics. Kunitz, Berryman, Roethke, Plath, Ginsberg, and Bogan – all cultivate different forms and measures to express their new experience. In India Kamala Das also uses free verse and vigorous and sweepy expressions to write her

autobiography in prose as well as verse. In doing so she sometimes loses her balance for which she is severely criticized by Linda Hess.

However, even though lacking a common form, confessional poetry is most probably the best outlet to give vent to the experience of alienation, the most terrible mental malady of the modern times. In the States this form became popular, since the Americans required an effective mode which could ventilate their alienation that was not a fashion for them, as it was with Europeans, but in the phrase of Robert Phillips, "a prime American experience."⁴⁸ They found the mode capable of charting their personal alienation as well as that of their friends and relatives. A sense of acute alienation was also central to Kamala Das. In a male-dominated Indian society, she found herself extremely lonely and wrote poetry to give expression to her stranded self.

But as poetry of alienation, confessional form is fraught with many dangers. The expression of alienation requires self-probing. One has to delve deep into one's oceanic unconscious full of filth and terrible mental monsters. These explorations, as mentioned earlier, can knock one's self off balance and can push one in abnormal states of mind. It is on record that Roethke's attempts to have a direct experience of manic states involved him in serious individual and social troubles. Sexton was also warned against milking her unconscious too much by her friends, including her teacher Holmes. In this connection, it is remarkable that many of the confessional poets were neurotic and some of them, including Sexton went on to commit suicide. Kamala Das's case is not much

different. She also slipped into manic states and suffered from mental diseases, including suicidal tendencies.

Dangers of self-exploration notwithstanding, confessional poetry in its sensational form seems to lack in substance. For the matter which it poetizes is highly individualistic and as such it has no universal appeal. It does not achieve transcendence which is the real aim of all good poetry. However, a good confessional poem is never purely personal or individualistic. It is rather universal and beneficial to others. "I write very personal poems," writes Sexton, "but I hope that they will become the central theme to some else's private life..."⁴⁹ A confessional poet writes about himself in order to make his reader aware of their own feelings and problems. "When I speak to you," writes Victor Hugo, "I am speaking to you about yourself."⁵⁰ Kamala Das also rises above herself untiringly revealing the nature of psychological processes behind human nature in its feminine as well as masculine aspects. She displays a psychical interplay of emotions and passions in human consciousness. However, she concentrates more on the female experience than on the male. According to Arlene R.K. Zide, she attempts to poetize the "universal experience of women."⁵¹

Confessional poetry in its serious mood, is not content only with the portrayal of the psychic states of Everyman and Everywoman but goes to describe the experience of higher states like the religious and the mystic states. The poetry of Ginsberg, Roethke, Lowell, Plath, and Sexton ultimately goes on to create a world, which in all its essentials, can be defined only in the light of religion and mysticism. The poems which they wrote during the last phase of their careers, can

be interpreted only in religious and mystic terms. Interestingly confessional poets attached great value to their transcendental poetry. They considered it more significant than their earlier poetry. For instance, in her interview with Barbara Kelves, Sexton emphatically asserted that "[i]n time to come, people [would] be more shocked by [her] mystical poetry than by [her] so-called 'confessional poetry.'" ⁵²

Furthermore, Sexton found a way to equate her suffering with the suffering of Jesus Christ and to view her poetry as mystic poetry. For her, "Christ was the great confessor." ⁵³ In this belief, Sexton found a ground for the identity of confessionalism with mysticism, and religion. At heart, Sexton was deeply religious. Some people thought that she was a lapsed Catholic. She admitted that in her early religious training, she was half Protestant and half Catholic. Her belief was reinforced by her religious experiences and visions of God, of Christ and of many saints. These visions lasted "for six months, six minutes, and six hours." ⁵⁴ In her interview with Kevles, Sexton admitted that she never shared her "religious experiences with anyone, not a psychiatrist, not a friend, not a priest, not anyone." ⁵⁵ She kept them to herself as well guarded secrets. These visions became the sources of solace and comfort for her. It is no wonder that these religious experiences surfaced in her poetry time and again.

Like Anne Sexton, Kamala Das also moved from naked or psychical confessionalism to religious confessionalism. As she came to discover that the pleasures of body are only ephemeral, she turned to the mythical and spiritual world of Radha and Krishna of Vrindavan. She was attached to Krishna since her

very childhood. In her poems, she talked of spiritual love and self-surrender. Spiritual love for her meant spirit love and complete merger of herself with the self of Krishna. She says:

I was entirely without lust. I hoped that some day as I lay with a man, somewhere beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, a contact would be made, and that afterwards each movement of my life became meaningful. I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man; every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna.⁵⁶

Thus the confessional poets who relish to unlock the mysteries of human body, ultimately come to reveal the mysteries of the life of spirit. Their poetry becomes the poetry of self-revelation, or a spiritual autobiography.

To recapitulate, both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are the most eloquent exponents of confessional poetry which dominated the English poetic scene in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Both as a poetic form and social practice, confessionalism is an ancient mode of expression. As a literary form, it was used by Sappho, and Catullus and later by Augustine, Rousseau, Rilke, Baudelaire, Whitman, and countless others who followed them. As a social practice of confession of one's guilt, it was used by the Church i.e. by the Father Confessor and subsequently the psychiatrist. It was also used by the Protestants in the form of keeping journals and writing diaries for marking their spiritual progress.

However, the confessional mode of literary expression in its modern form, originated in America as a reaction to the poetic conventions of Modernism. As a term, it was first used by M.L. Rosenthal, while reviewing Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959). Since then it was used to denote the poetic exploits of Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Karl

Shapiro, Denise Levertov, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Jerome Mazzaro, William Heyen, Kunitz, Barbara Harr, and Randall Jarrell as well as by Allen Ginsberg, and Theodore Roethke. Within a decade it produced such tremendous works as Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959), W.D. Snodgrass's Heart's Needle (1959), Anne Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), All My Pretty Ones (1962), and Live or Die (1966), Theodore Roethke's The Far Field (1964), John Berryman's Dream Songs (1964), Sylvia Plath's Ariel (1965), Kunitz's The Testing Tree (1971), etc. Elsewhere in the Commonwealth countries, this mode produced Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Judith Wright, and Margaret Atwood, who wrote such remarkable books as Das's Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Wright's Five Senses (1963), and Atwood's Power Politics (1971) etc.

According to scholarly consensus Robert Lowell was the father of confessional poetry with both W.D. Snodgrass and Anne Sexton as other close claimants for the title. All the three poets produced not the autobiographies but really the mythologies of their passionate and erring selves under various circumstances, physical exposures, mental stress, personal failures, and humiliations. Sexton and other female confessional poets introduced an element of sensationalism in the mode when they indulged to reveal the mysteries of the female body, hitherto considered a taboo in the cultured world. Confessional poets devised ways and means, and introduced new techniques to express the alienation of the generation and their existential needs physical as well as spiritual. They aim at not only their own therapy but the social therapy meant for all sufferers.

Confessional poetry of the modern era has some distinctive characteristics. First and foremost, it is autobiographical. Confessional poets have written tremendous biographies of their self, hiding nothing from the public view. Giving expression to their buried self, they put no barriers between their self and its complete exposure. While portraying the workings, internal as well external, of their untrammelled self they use ordinary or colloquial language. However, they do not express their open emotions without literary devices. They make an effective use of irony, understatement as well as of fancy to make their self-disclosures effective and aesthetic. Nevertheless, confessional poetry in its sensational form lacks form, and substance. It is fraught with the dangers of self-probing which frequently result in mental diseases like schizophrenia and manic depressions. But in its higher forms, it touches the heights of religious and mystic experience. Both Sexton and Das, in their poetic adventures, achieve religious and mystic states.

Chapter 1 – Notes

¹Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973) 6: hereafter cited as Phillips.

²See N. Ramadevi, "Kamala Das and the Confessional Mode," Kamala Das A Critical Spectrum, eds. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciuccio (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001) 140: the article hereafter cited as Ramadevi and the book as Spectrum.

³Elizabeth Drew in collaboration with John L. Sweeney, Directions in Modern Poetry (New York: Gordian Press, 1967) 40: hereafter cited as Drew.

⁴Donald Hall, qtd. Charles Altieri, Enlarging the Temple (London: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1942) 15: the book hereafter cited as Altieri.

⁵Ralph J. Mills Jr., Cry of the Human: Essays on Contemporary American Poetry (London: Illinois Univ. Press, 1975) 8: hereafter cited as Mills.

⁶Mills 8.

⁷Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms (New York: Octagon Books, 1976) 1: hereafter cited as Juhasz.

⁸Jane McCabe, "A Woman Who Writes': A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton," Anne Sexton the Artist and Her Critics, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington Indiana Univ. Press, 1978) 216: hereafter the article cited as McCabe and book as McClatchy.

⁹Iqbal Kaur, "I Needed to Disturb Society," Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry ed. Iqbal Kaur (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1995) 161: hereafter the interview cited as Kaur and the book as Perspectives.

¹⁰Qtd. Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Bonton: Twayne, A Division of G.K. Hall and Company, 1989) 33: hereafter cited as Hall.

¹¹The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, ed. A.S. Hornby, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974): hereafter cited as Oxford Dictionary.

- ¹²Sappho, qtd. Phillips 10.
- ¹³Phillips 10.
- ¹⁴Catullus, qtd. Phillips 3.
- ¹⁵Lowell, qtd. Phillips 6.
- ¹⁶Sexton, William Packard, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," McClatchy 44.
- ¹⁷Sexton, Patricia Marx, "Interview with Anne Sexton," McClatchy 38-39.
- ¹⁸Phillips 7-8.
- ¹⁹Phillips 8.
- ²⁰M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 79: hereafter cited as Rosenthal.
- ²¹A.R. Jones, qtd. Hall 34.
- ²²Mills, qtd. Hall 34.
- ²³Sexton, "Interview with Barbara Kelves," McClatchy 8: hereafter cited as Kelves.
- ²⁴Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 6.
- ²⁵Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 34.
- ²⁶Kamala Das, My Story (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1988) VIII: hereafter cited as My Story.
- ²⁷My Story
- ²⁸Ginsberg, qtd. Phillips XV.
- ²⁹Deborah Pope, A Separate Vision: Isolation in Contemporary Women's Poetry (Boston Rogers: Louisiana State, 1984) 6-7: hereafter cited as Pope.
- ³⁰Sexton, qtd. Phillips 75.

³¹Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 28.

³²Phillips 2.

³³Kamala Das, qtd. Kaur 167.

³⁴Kamala Das, qtd. Kaur, "Preparatory Note," VIII: hereafter cited as "Note"

³⁵Kamala Das, "Note" 8.

³⁶Kevles, McClatchy 4.

³⁷Niranjan Mohanti, "A Feminist Perspective on Kamala Das's Poetry," Perspectives 64: hereafter cited as Mohanti.

³⁸S.D. Sharma, "Kamala Das's Poetry," Perspectives 4: hereafter cited as Sharma.

³⁹Phillips 9.

⁴⁰Phillips 10.

⁴¹Phillips 10.

⁴²Marjori Perloff, qtd. Hall 36.

⁴³Lowell, qtd. Hall 36.

⁴⁴Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 22.

⁴⁵Sharad Rajimwale, "Kamala Das – Need for Re-assessment," Spectrum, 167.

⁴⁶Devendra Kohli, Kamala Das (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1975) 27: hereafter cited as Kohli.

⁴⁷Phillips 12.

⁴⁸Phillips 14.

⁴⁹Sexton, qtd. Phillips 15.

⁵⁰Victor Hugo, qtd. Phillips 15.

⁵¹Arlene R.K. Zide, rev. of The Old Playhouse and Other Poems by Kamala Das, Journal of South Asian Literature 16, 1 (1981): 239: hereafter cited as Zide.

⁵²Sexton, Kelves, McClatchy 26.

⁵³See Phillips 80.

⁵⁴Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 24.

⁵⁵Sexton, Kevles 25.

⁵⁶Sexton, qtd. Sharma, Kaur 9.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON

The focal point of confessional poetry is poet's own life. Confessional poets create the mythologies of their self from their own life-experience. They raise their poetic fabric by weaving the events of their life. "Anne Sexton [also] believed that the most interesting poetry was written out of personal experience."¹ Her own creative impulse grew from the "need to make form from (the) chaos" of her physical and mental life.² In most of her poems, she removed even the thin veneer that stood between herself and her poetic persona, as she herself assumed the role of the speaker. Naturally her poetry can be understood only in terms of her life-experience i.e. in the light of the events which directed the course of her life and formed her mentality or even her poetic consciousness.

The first important factor to shape Sexton's career was her family background. Anne Gray Harvey later Anne Sexton was born in a prominent family of Newton, Massachusetts in 1928. Her parents May Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill Harvey belonged to a class of intellectuals, politicians, and businessmen. Her mother aspired for a literary career which she had to abandon after marriage. Her father owned a successful woollen business. The family background became one of the chief motifs of Sexton's poetry. Her diminishing status in life of which she speaks of in her poetry became the symbol of the diminishing of the American myth itself.

As a formative factor, Sexton's childhood was no less important. She was brought up with her sisters Jane (born in 1923) and Blanche (born in 1923). During her childhood she lived in Boston suburbs including Cambridge, Wellesley, and Weston in spacious houses. In the summer, Sexton's family moved to the Maine seacoast where the Harveys, Dingleys, and Staples, gathered. Sexton's memories of these summers were rather happy. Nevertheless, even during this happy period of her life, she developed, in Hall's words, "a flamboyant, willful pattern of behaviour."³ "She had also developed a view of herself as outcast and unwanted."⁴ "At six," wrote Sexton in a 1963 poem, "I lived in a graveyard full of dolls.: I will speak of the little childhood cruelties,/being a third child,/and lost given/being the unwanted, the mistake..."⁵

However, during her childhood she had one of the most defining events of her life in the form of her close relationship with her maternal great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley. Anne called her "Nana" and became greatly attached to this "soft white lady of [her] heart."⁶ Nana's death in 1954, at the age of eighty-six became one of the most shattering events of her life. She was shocked because she considered herself guilty of her suffering and subsequent death. Anna lived with them and suffered for years from senility or madness. In a 1958 letter, Sexton wrote:

My Nana went crazy when I was thirteen... At the time I blamed myself for her going because she lived with our family and was my only friend.⁷

Sexton's school-days were also crucial in the formation of her poetic personality. Interestingly her school-days produced a different Anne. Whether at

public school in Wellesley or at the Girl Boarding School Rogers Hall, or The Garland School in Boston, she appeared as an energetic, flirtation, vivacious, and popular youngster. But underneath this pleasant exterior their lurked the shadows of pain which made her a class rogue. Though a little careless, she was able to demonstrate her intellectual prowesses to her teachers. Anne started her poetic career at Rogers Hall. But she abandoned writing poetry when her mother, though wrongly, accused her of plagiarizing Sara Teasdale.

Obviously the most crucial days of Sexton's life were the days after her marriage. In the summer 1948, when Anne was nineteen, she fell in love with "Kayo" or Alfred Muller Sexton II, a sophomore premedical student at Colgate University. She eloped with him to Sunbury Cariolina, where the couple was eventually married. After marriage their life was a little unsettled as they had to move from place to place and join different jobs for their livelihood. Though, for five years they had run from pillar to post, their life was not so unpleasant. However, things dramatically changed for them after the birth of their first child Linda Gray Sexton on July 21, 1953. For Anne childbirth was a horrifying experience, so horrifying that she did not like to discuss it.

After Linda's birth, their life became a little settled, as they purchased a house at 40 Clearwater Road in Newton Lower Falls. They continued to live there for the next eleven years. Kayo was now employed in the Sexton Woollen business. But for Anne the experience of motherhood was followed by a series of misfortunes. The next two years brought for her a series of emotional setbacks. As Linda Sexton and Lois Ames write, during the period Anne "was intermittently

hospitalized at Westwood Lodge, in Westwood, Massachusetts, for attempted suicide. Kayo's mother took charge of Linda. Equally devastating for Anne was the death in July 1954 of her Nana, Anna Ladd Dingley. This was loss that she never resolved and that she was to explore again and again in her poetry."⁸

These experiences completely upset her life. Anna's death created a vacuum in her life which was never filled. "This was the loss," writes Hall, "that she never resolved and that she was to explore again and again in her poetry."⁹ The shocking experience of Nana's death was followed by yet another troublesome experience, the birth of Joyce their second child. According to Sexton and Ames, "Anne was unprepared for the responsibility of another infant, an inquisitive two-year-old, a household, and a husband... Her anger and concomitant depression deepened."¹⁰ Subsequently in March 1956, Sexton again hospitalized for depression. During her hospitalization Linda lived with her Harvey grandparents, while Joyce went to live with the Sextons. When Anne returned home Linda returned as well but Joyce did not do so. She remained with Sextons for three years. Subsequently the little child "ceased to recognize Anne as her mother."¹¹ It was an emotional shock to her, so tremendous that she returned to it in her poetry again and again.

To resume our story, on November 9, 1956 Anne attempted to commit suicide. This attempt became crucial to her poetic carrier. For it led him to Dr. Sidney Martin who encouraged her to write poetry. With his persistent persuasion Sexton developed into a great poet. It is frequently observed that the throes of pain energize the dormant springs of creative sensibility and open the flood-gates of

poetry. The sufferer is transformed into a poet speaking about the wounds received from the callous world as well as the wounds of the suffering humanity at large. Naturally with these agonizing experiences, the poetic sensibility of Anne Sexton awakened from its psychical slumber.

Indeed Sexton's sickness became the springboard to launch her poetic career. Beginning to appreciate her poetic talent, she attended seminars, conferences, and workshops. However, her literary activities were interspersed with the bouts of mental sickness and tragic events. In September 1957, she attended a poetry seminar at Boston University. In the seminar she came in contact with Maxine Kumin and established a life-long friendship. In 1958, Sexton attended the Antioch Summer Writers' Conference in August where she met W.D. Snodgrass. In September 1958, she attended the poetry seminar taught by Robert Lowell at Boston University. This seminar was also attended by Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck. Then in the following year in August 1959 Sexton came to attend the Bread Loaf Conference.

Interestingly the years of her poetic training were also the years of sickness and sorrow, of suffering and acute guilt consciousness. She suffered from mental breakdowns and had to attend psychiatric sessions, so much so that mental institutions became her "summer hotel" or "sealed hotel." On March, 10, 1959, her mother died of breast cancer. Then just after three months, on June, 3, her father died of a cerebral haemorrhage. Both of these tragic events produced a sense of guilt in her. While her mother accused Sexton of giving her cancer, her father felt frustrated for her disapproval of his remarriage. Time and again Sexton

returned to express her guilt conscious in her poetry. In October 1959 she contracted pneumonia and underwent surgery to remove her appendix and ovary. At this time she developed a lurking fear of having cancer.

Nevertheless, these trying conditions did not dampen her spirits and did not extinguish the aesthetic spark. They rather provided grist to her poetic mill. According to Caroline King Barnard Hall, Sexton used "material from her psychiatric sessions,"¹² for her poetry. Even the death of her parents provided her with poetic themes. She wrote poems like "The Truth The Death Know" and "All My Pretty Ones." Her surgery also became the theme of her poem "The Operation." Obviously the experiences of this period awakened in her a poet of tremendous power and produced such a great work of confessional mode as To Bedlam and Part Way Back which was published in 1960.

This period was important not only for the development of poetic sensibility but also for the future course of her life. "The pattern of professional success," writes Hall, "personal tragedy, and emotional difficulty characterized the rest of Anne Sexton's life."¹³ In the followings years, in the month of the publication of her first book, she lost her father-in-law in an automobile accident. Then she suffered from homesickness and depression after her abortive tour of Europe with Sandy Robert, her neighbour. Sylvia Plath's suicide in early 1963 made her more miserable.

In the Fall, 1962, her second volume of poetry entitled All My Pretty Ones, commemorating dead members of her family, was published. It was nominated for the National Book Award. Around 1966, Sexton began work on a novel which she

described as "just a woman's story, another woman's story and so what."¹⁴ But she could never finish this novel. In the fall of the same year i.e. 1966, Sexton published her third volume of poetry, Love or Die. She was awarded America's highest literary prize, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In February 1969, Sexton published her fourth volume of poetry Love Poems. During the same year, she also worked on "Mercy Street." After two years, Sexton published her fifth volume of poetry Transformations, in 1971. During the period, she received many awards, fellowships and scholarships, including the fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Ford Foundation grant, fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature, travel grant from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, Guggenheim Fellowship, honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Radcliffe, honorary doctorates of letters from the universities of Tufts and Fairfield as well as from Regis College.

The tone and tendency of Sexton's last days was in no way different. Her life repeated the same tale of creativity alternating with emotional disturbances. In February 1973 Sexton asked her husband for divorce against the advice of her psychiatrist and many of her friends. She was granted divorce in November of the same year. Sexton was admitted to McClean Hospital during this last year for emotional disturbance. But in spite of depression she continued writing furiously, but with a difference. Sexton's gaze now turned gradually from her personal self towards the Supreme Self or Christ. In a 1970 letter, she wrote, "Yes, it is time to think about Christ again. I keep putting it off. If he is the God/man, I would feel a hell of a lot better."¹⁵

The story of this transformation is embodied in the books which followed in close succession, The Book of Folly (1972), The Death Notebooks (1974), and The Awful Rowing (1975), the last being published posthumously. These books as usual incorporated the "familiar themes of Sexton's previous poetry poetic considerations of death, particularly the death of poet's close family members (her mother, father, and great-aunt) of the poet herself; of guilt over the lives and deaths of those people; of love for husband and daughters, and I suspect, for other as well; and of anger, especially towards certain men, chief among them the psychiatrist and the deserting lover."¹⁶ However, these themes now produced an entirely different music since they were now attuned to the theme of the search for God. They announced Sexton's hope of renouncing doubt and embracing faith. Though the poems were death directed, "but death often represent[ed] the beginning of new life."¹⁷ It was only towards the end of her poetic career that Sexton was able to show the heights that her confessional poetry could measure.

A close perusal of Sexton's life and works suggests that her poetic career marked certain progression. It had four distinct phases of apprenticeship, maturity, religious consciousness, and collapsing rationality. During these phases her poetic sensibility moved from the bare confessional candour to the depths of religious consciousness of a distinct Christian variety. Her buried self emerging from the dark caves of the unconscious, came to the fore to row towards the island of God and to bask in the sunshine of divinity. The confessions of buried self and its religious and mystic longings assumed the form of two distinct currents vying for supremacy. It was the confessional current which came to the fore during the

period of apprenticeship, while the religious current remained submerged, but was not entirely dormant. It frequently made its presence felt in some way or the other.

During the period of apprenticeship, Sexton was "preoccupied with learning her craft and finding her own voice."¹⁸ This period began in 1957 and lasted till 1962, producing such momentous works as To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All My Pretty Ones. In these books Anne explored the themes self-identity, loss, guilt, and of course courage, therapy, purgation which are the flood-subjects of confessionalism. She dealt with two kinds of confession, physical as well as psychological. While in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she poetized the confessions of the body, in All My Pretty Ones she delineated confessions of the mind to purge mental sickness.

In To Bedlam and Part Way Back Sexton described her experiences of those eventful years after her marriage during which she gave birth to Linda and Joyce, lost her parents and her dear Nana and was hospitalized for mental disturbance. The books has two parts: Bedlam and Part Way Back. While the Bedlam volume deals with her hospital days, her life in the "summer hotel" or "sealed hotel," or about her madness, Part Way Back embodies her sense of loss intermingled with occasional hope.

Bedlam is central to the first volume, since it provides a perfect setting to the poems included in the volume. This Bedlam, though actual, assumes at times a symbolic character. Sexton, in spite of her low spirits, conceives of poetry, to be precise her confessional poetry, in eloquent terms as an instrument of enlightenment. For her the poet, just like a philosopher, is a relentless seeker of

truth. He is caught between the dauntless spirit of an Oedipus who wanted to know truth at every cost and compulsive inhibitions of Jocasta who begs Oedipus not to go too far. She makes this poetic dilemma quite explicit through Schopenhauer's statement used as the epigraph of the volume:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further.¹⁹

"The poet Sexton's role," comments Hall, "like the philosopher's, is to seek enlightenment at any cost, at the cost of disapproval, disaffection, madness, death. But the poet also has a bit of Jocasta in her who whispers that the effort is not worth the cost. One may speculate as well that the Jocasta whom the poet carries in her heart speaks also in the person of her family, her friends, and her colleagues."²⁰

Indeed Sexton's friends and relatives who did not approve of her candour and doubted the value of self-exposures tried to dissuade her from going too far, warning her against the pitfalls of shameless confessions and dangers of milking one's unconscious too much. Obviously she was caught between the Oedipal Dr. Martin, her psychiatrist and the Jocastan John Holmes, her teacher. While the former encouraged her to make clean breast of her obsessions, the latter cautioned her advising her not to expose herself and her family. But the Oedipus in her proved stronger and she decided to fire burners in her defence. She wrote a poem "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," and followed it by a letter to

Holmes. Then she went on to write a letter, stating the value of the mode, to W.D. Snodgrass, who was also writing in confessional mode. "I am," she stated, "about to write an article in defense of sincere poetry... I guess because I am starting to get attacked on my kind of poetry. I guess this always happens when you do something out of the norm. John Holmes thinks my book is unseemly, too personal, tho talented. So I have been firing the burners in defense of myself."²¹

At this time Sexton was fired with the spirit of a dare-devil and did not hesitate to tread the path which everybody feared to walk. The poem which she wrote came to provide a credo not only to herself but to all confessional poets.

She wrote:

Not that is was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind,
in the common places of the asylum

there ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope.

(Bedlam 51-52)

Sexton's poetic mission is not simply self-exposure but seek to order in the chaotic world of Bedlam as well as to inculcate hope of finding a way back. Through her confessional candour she aims at achieving what Robert Frost calls "momentary stay against confusion."²² However, unlike Frost, she seeks the state beyond confusion in an extremely perilous way. Sexton outlines her way to salvation in her poem "Kind Sir: These Woods," with the metaphor of a spinning game. In this poem the poet presents her own condition. She has left her familiar

world. As she spins with her eyes closed, she becomes dizzy and finds in a nightmare world. Since this nightmare world now becomes a reality to her, she refuses to open her eyes and to return to her old world. Her inward world, even though full of thorny woods, also has sweet fruits. Interestingly, Sexton addresses this poem to Thoreau whose biblical statement in Walden, she uses as the epigraph of the poem: "For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost... Not til we are lost... do we begin to find ourselves" (Bedlam 5). Sexton poetizes the theme of finding one's self through losing in the internal world in her characteristic way:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind
I have turned around twice with eyes sealed
and the woods were white and my night mind
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course
to look-this inward look that society scorns –
still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

(Bedlam 5)

In the concluding lines the poet expresses her hope that the exploration of the inward world would help her to find her way back from Bedlam. This theme of loss and gain energizes all the Bedlam poems. There is no denying the fact that some of Bedlam poems use shocking themes of madness, abortion, the birth of an illegitimate child, and suicide. But the focal point still remains the theme of self-discovery. It implies that Sexton does not indulge in self-exposure for its own sake, but for achieving some higher aim like self-purification and mental health. Sexton continues to portray her attempt to find order in a world of chaos in other

poems of Bedlam. Five poems deal with Bedlam experience directly and literally. Among these poem, the most important one is the first poem of the volume "You, Doctor Martin," which explores the nature of her mental asylum, "evoking its sounds and sensations, describing its routines, and tracing its conflicts, frustrations, and hopes."²³ Moreover, the poem also goes on to suggest a way back or at least something like a way. The central figure of the poem is Dr. Martin who, as a father-figure, assumes the roles of a therapist, prince, and deity. The poetic persona also appears in the form of a priestess, queen, and beloved.

You, Doctor Martin, walk
From breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
Where the moving dead still talk
Of pushing their bones against the thrust
Of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel.
Though she realizes herself as the queen of his
hospital, she is painfully aware of her real status. She is
nothing more than an ordinary person, mentally sick
and standing in a broken line just like others:
We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count as at the frozen gates
of dinner. (SP 9)

Naturally like other patients, Sexton is also given a therapeutic job to do. Incidentally, her job is to make moccasins – a fate which she readily accepts:

I make
moccasins all morning. (SP 9)

Later on, Anne Sexton assumes the role of a priestess, for whom this hospital is her own temple. Her God is none else than Dr. Martin whom she loves and adores:

Of course, I love you;
You lean above the plastic sky,
God of our block, prince of all the foxes. (SP 9)

That is to say, for Sexton Dr. Martin has a double image. He is the prince of the summer palace of which she is the princess and at the same time, the God of this temple of which she is the priestess. However, neither of these roles is real. Sexton goes on to introduce the theme of lostness in the poem, a theme that finds its most eloquent expression in "You, Doctor Martin:"

....Am I still lost?
Ones I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
Counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf.

(SP 10)

There are four other poems in Bedlam which are set in the mental hospital. All these poems explore the hospital experience and suggest the way back. But their approach is not inclusive. "Music Swims Back to Me" is important in the sense it "recreates the consciousness of speaker-as-patient."²⁴ Lost in the darkness of the mental asylum, the childlike persona tries to find the way home. The poet, speaking in the language and cadences of a child writes:

Wait Mister,

La la la,

(SP 12)

"Mister," according to Hall is an authority figure which is capable of helping her. But it is music which is more helpful to the speaker. It gives her at least a temporary stay. It can remind her the moment of her arrival here, when she discovers that "everyone here was crazy:

Imagine it. A radio playing
and everyone here was crazy.
I liked it and danced in a circle.
Music pours over the sense
and in a funny way
music seems more than I.
I mean it remembers better;

(Bedlam 8)

In other poems the speaker finds herself firmly placed in the atmosphere of the bedlam. Now she finds herself farther from the discovery of a way back. In "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" the speaker feels threatened. She uses refrains from the Twenty-third Psalm, as desperate talismans to ward off the danger from the assailing environment. These refrains are used in the third line of every stanza in italicized form:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow

I will fear no evil

In the presence of mine enemies

(Bedlam 39)

In "Lullaby," Sexton, uses several images to describe her slipping from consciousness, after taking sleeping pill. However, these images ensure only a temporary erasure of the fear described in "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn":

My sleeping pill is white.
It is a splendid pearl;
It floats me out of myself,
my stung skin as alien
as a loose bolt of cloth.
I will ignore the bed.
I am linen on a shelf.
Let the others moan in secret;
let each lost butterfly
go home. Old woolen head,
take me like a yellow moth

while the goat calls hush –
a-bye.

(Bedlam 41)

According to Hall a childlike persona is central to most of the Bedlam poems. The speakers of these poems suggest that childhood and madness are nearly identical. The poem "Ringing the Bells" uses this childlike quality as its organizing principle.

The poems of the second part of the volume the Part Way Back are only a little different in tone and temperament. They revolve round the themes of loss, memory, and guilt. "Much of the poetry in this volume," writes Barnard Hall, "then, reflects and gives expression to the speaker's perception of a diminished present, a remembered, happier past, and a sense of guilt at having survived."²⁵ Obviously most of the poems are concerned with loss. This loss is of several kinds, including loss of friendship, innocence, love, time, connections, and happiness. This loss may be the loss of Nana... ("Some Foreign Letters," "Elizabeth Gone," "The Waiting Head"), or mother ("The Division of Parts"), or father ("The Bells," "The Moss of his Skin"), or innocence ("The Expatriates," "Where I Live in this Honourable House of the Laurel Tree"), or children ("Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward"), or youthful joys ("The Kite," "Funnel," "The Road Back"), or friends ("For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach," "A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston").²⁶

The memory of the poetic persona is "often tinged with guilt," especially the guilt she felt at the loss of the close relatives. When Sexton was a school-girl, she lost her beloved great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley who lived with her family.

She felt herself guilty of her madness and death. In a 1958 letter, she wrote: "My Nana went crazy when I was thirteen... At the time I blamed myself for her going because she lived with our family and was my only friend. Then at thirteen I kissed a boy... and I was so pleased with my womanhood that I told Nana I was kissed and then she went mad... A thirteen, I was blameful and struck."²⁷

Besides, while she was writing her Bedlam poems, her mother died in March 1959. She again blamed herself for mother's illness and her subsequent death. In a 1958 letter expressing her sense of guilt, she went on to write: "I am depressed. My mother is dying of cancer. My mother say I gave her cancer (as though death were catching death being the birthday that I tried to kill myself, Nov. 9th 1956). Then she got cancer... who do we kill, which image in the mirror, the mother, ourself, our daughter?????"²⁸ Her sense of guilt was acute that she began to lose her balance. This guilty consciousness became all the more intense, as Sexton saw her father crying at the death of her mother. She expresses this painful experience in her letter written in 1959: "My life is falling through a sieve... I'm dropping out of myself. Partly because my mother is dying now and I... I know it's crazy, but I feel like it is my fault... My father, since his shock, is not the same; he acts about ten years old, and keeps crying and begging my mother not to die."²⁹

In her poems written on Nana, Sexton uses the life of her dear Nana to dramatize her own distress and disappointment. She speaks of her present misery in the background of the youthful Nana – the Nana who wrote letters from Europe)

- and the old Nana whom she knew. In "Some Foreign Letters," Sexton images Nana first as an old lady and second, as a youthful girl:

I knew you forever and you were always old,
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.

----- And I
see you as a young girl in a good world still,
writing three generations before mine. I try
to reach into your page and breathe it back....
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

(Bedlam 13)

The poetic persona goes on to dally with the two images of Nana along with her own youthful image. Ultimately in the last stanza, she comes out to decipher the guilt of her Nana in loving the Count:

Tonight I will learn to love you twice;

Tonight I will speak up and interrupt
your letters, warning you that warns are coming,
that the Count will die, ---

----- And I tell you,
you will tip your boot feet out of that hall,

----- letting your spectacles fall
and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by
to mumble your guilty love while your ears die.

(Bedlam 15)

According to Barnard Hall memory and guilt combine on three levels. On the first level, Nana's love is guilty, since the Count is married. On the second level, Sexton is guilty for her failure in rescuing Nana from her own diminished future. On the third level, she is guilty for Nana's madness and senility. On the

whole the Nana poems bring out the pathos of the failure of memory to mitigate the sense of loss and guilt. "There is real pathos," writes Hall, "in the speaker's realization that rather than exorcise loss and guilt, memory can only perpetuate them."³⁰

However, memory has its silver lining too. It has, as Sexton poetizes in "The Double Image," tremendous potentials to deal with the past in a positive way. It can look beyond loss and sound a note of affirmation. The poem, described by Sexton as "two hundred odd lines of confession and art"³¹ and first titled as "The Double Image: A Confession," presents the double image of the time past and present as well as the double instincts of love and death which run parallel to each other. The poem is, a dramatic monologue in which Anne Sexton, the mother of thirty envisions herself addressing something to her four year old daughter Joyce, with whom she is united after an absence of four year. The interval of four years has been full of pain and turmoil. In this duration, Sexton attempts suicide twice. She is hospitalized and stays with her mother for recovery. "The Double Image" is divided into seven sections. The first section describes the painful experiences of her four years which are lost. She, though pretending to address her daughter, explains the loss of four years to herself.

The poem opens with the mother speaker portraying her suicide attempt with the falling of a few winter leaves along with her long separation from her daughter.

I am... thirty this November
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,

flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know,
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

(Bedlam 53)

In the following stanzas, Sexton expresses her guilt of causing her infant daughter's illness, her actual figurative death attempt and resurrection, her advice to the little girl to love her "self's self," her (Sexton's) return to mother's house after her first suicide attempt, her second suicide attempt, and ultimately her experience of identity and recovery. In the closing lines, Sexton combines the themes of "identity, guilt, and self-knowledge," as Hall phrases them:

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

(Bedlam 61)

"The Double Image," which in its movement reminds us of Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," dramatizes Sexton's partial emergence from the dark night experience of the soul, with the touching alchemy of love. The central theme of 'The Double Image,' is guilt that brings darkness and guilt for having caused the illness both of daughter and mother. Then it is love that heals. The poet then goes onto explain to her daughter the necessity to love one's "self's self."

All the poems of Part Way Back are remarkable for the psychological consciousness of loss, guilt, and pain. But there is at least one poem, "The

Division of Parts" which goes on to deal with another variety of consciousness, that eventually comes to dominate Sexton's later works. Introducing religious symbolism of Good Friday, Mary, and Christ, she announces the recovery of her faith in God – a faith she had questioned in "The Double Image." In the poem she refers to her dead mother who had become like Christ to her. The poem begins with Sexton's searching out her mother's possession, remembering her (mother's) painful past and her suffering from cancer. She is led to identify the sufferings of her mother with those of Christ. She comes to conclude that in suffering, she is united with Christ who suffered profoundly for the sake of mankind. The action Sexton wants to repeat is the experience of Christ's suffering through words and by doing so, she wants to inherit the legacy of Christ's suffering:

And now, while Christ stays
Fastened to his Crucifix
so that love may praise
his sacrifice
and not the grotesque metaphor,
you come, a brave ghost, to fix
in my mind without praise
or paradise
to make me your inheritor.³²

It is in "The Division of Parts" that Sexton clarifies her real aim of writing confessional poetry. Her act of writing is an act of confession. She does not expose her private life for the sake of exposure or for creating a sensation to make herself famous. She lays bare her inner-self to purify her senses, her body, and her mind so that she can proceed on the Mystic Way which envisages purgation as a pre-condition to union.

On the whole To Bedlam and Part Way Back, is a blending of fact and fiction. There are poems which refer to the real experiences. There are also poems which are simply figments of imagination. We can cite at least two poems in the volume that are related to the persons who did not exist. For instance, Sexton's portrayal of an unknown girl in "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" had no basis in reality. Likewise her reference to a brother in "For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach" and later in "The Papa and Mama" incorporated in Love Poems is questionable, since she had no brother.

Sexton's second book All My Pretty Ones is also a landmark of confessional poetry. The volume, though continuing to deal with the consciousness of loss, guilt, and remorse, is suffused with Sexton's confidence as a poet after her public recognition as an experienced poet. Imbued with new spirit, she takes her confessionalism to higher-stage, i.e. from the physical states to mental states of consciousness. If in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sexton attempts to purge the obsessions of her physical self, in All My Pretty Ones, she goes on to purge her buried self, chiefly from the haunting memories of her departed friends and relatives. The poet by now discovers the role of a poem as an axe to cut the frozen sea within the buried self as well as the value of fiction in writing the biography of self. Sexton also develops a new poetic strategy of mixing literal truths or biological materials to reveal the emotional truth hidden underneath. Besides, Sexton reveals new directions of her poetry that makes explicit her growing interest in religion which will ultimately lead her to provide spiritual orientation to her confessional mode.

In order to define her thematic and formal concerns, she uses an excerpt from Macbeth and a quotation from a letter of Franz Kafka, as an epigraph. The excerpt from Macbeth is the source of the title of the book:

All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? O hell – Kite! All?
What! All my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?....
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me.³³

At the same time, the quotation from Franz Kafka underscores the sharp edge of poetry “The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation – a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.”³⁴ Commenting on Sexton’s frozen sea within her, Diana Hume George observes that “‘the frozen sea within us,’ which keeps us from the depths of both pain and pleasure that arise from breaking the surface and plunging into the past, that creates the present.”³⁵

Although the volume contains many remarkable poems, the most representatives ones from the confessional point of view, are “The Truth the Dead Know,” “The Operation,” and “In the Deep Museum.” The volume opens with “The Truth the Dead Know” dedicated to her parents. It is centralized on poet’s grief of their sad demise. Their death diminishes her present:

.... where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate.
(SP 43)

The absence of the parents not only changes her external circumstances but also weakens her courage to face the world. Subsequently she feels "tired of being brave" (SP 43). However, in the end, her mood changes, as she realizes that no one in this world is alone and that death is inevitable. She becomes conscious of the fact that none can protect oneself and one's pretty ones from the cruel jaws of death. Ultimately, the dead ones are reduced to stones without human feelings:

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
in their stone boats. They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

(SP 43)

In the title poem "All My Pretty Ones," Sexton mourns over the death of her father. She expresses the "raw emotion and bitterness" about the "dead." The poem as usual, reveals Sexton's intimate love for her father as also for her other dead relatives. The sight of his snap works like an "ax" to dig the memories of her father from her buried self. Envisioning the figure of her father, she writes:

But the eyes, as thick as wood in this album,
hold me. I stop here, where a small boy
waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come...

(SP 44)

However, in the end, the poet is overtaken as usual by the sense of guilt. She becomes conscious of her part in the sudden end or the sad demise of her dear father:

This year, solvent but sick, you meant
to marry that pretty widow in a one month rush.
But before you had that second chance, I cried
on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died.

(SP 44)

These lines not only express Sexton's guilt consciousness but also reveal the Electra Complex which shows a morbid attachment of the daughter to her father and a morbid rivalry with her mother. It is no secret that Sexton despised her mother and developed an intimate love for her father. The Electra in Sexton feels relieved at the death of her mother but when she learns that her father is going to marry second time, Electra in her loses control. Hence, her outbursts against her father are not the outbursts of a normal daughter but that of Electra in Sexton. She is no longer prepared to share her love for father with any other woman. It is no wonder that Sexton's concern with her father's alcoholic tendency is identical with that of her mother as a wife:

I hold a five year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all the does not say
of your alcoholic tendency.

(SP 45)

Sexton's morbid tendency towards her father pervades throughout the poem. It is evident also in the image of the strange face which has raised some controversy. Let us quote the lines in which this image occurs:

The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

(SP 45)

The question is, why the face of Sexton has become strange to her father. It has been suggested that the face has become strange because of age. However, Sexton tries to suggest much more. For her, the image contains a sexual

implication which is quite unusual for her daughter. To quote her: "I would say it's also got a kind of sexual thing there. You can understand that; you know, to kiss him then, to kiss death itself. My strange face – it was always pretty strange to him for actually not being pretty."³⁶

In "Operation" Sexton attempts to reveal the emotional truth lying behind the literal truth of her abdominal surgery to remove an ovarian cyst, a fallopian tube and an appendix. Her operation involves an emotional truth as well. Undergoing this operation, Sexton associates her hospitalization and fears cancer. With the hospitalization of her mother and her actual death of cancer subsequently, she is overtaken by fear of her own death and a sense of deeply felt guilt. She expresses this truth through metonymy, or the substitution of words:

After the sweet promise
the summer's mild retreat
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath
While I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate
my ills with hers
and decide to operate.

(SP 52)

The equation of daughter's illness with mother's continues figuratively in the following stanzas as well. Sexton continues to express her feelings in so many different ways by exploiting metonymical transfers. In stanza-2, she regards mother's cancer as an evil, which grew in her mother's womb in which she also grew. "The fetus-daughter shares a setting with the evil cancer, thereby sharing responsibility for the mother's death."³⁷

After surgery Sexton finds herself floating between life and death and associates her experience with her mother's. However, in the resolution of the poem, Sexton introduces another strategy to manipulate the emotional truth. She no longer associates herself with her dad mother but with her friend Louis Simpson, who urged her to get well. She now comes to believe that the life and great beauty are still left in this world. Therefore she does not want to die but to recover and live. Thus she overcomes her death – wish with the assertion:

All's well, they say. They say I'm better.
I lounge in frills or, picturesque,
I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall.
I read a new book and shuffle past the desk
to mail the author my first fan letter.
Time now to pack this humpty-dumpy
back the frightened way she came
and run along, Anne, and run along now,
my stomach laced up like a football
for the game.

(SP 55)

In "Operation," M.L. Rosenthal finds all the characteristic qualities of the confessional mode, including the elements of autobiography and psychology. The poem is writes Rosenthal, "developed in the first person and [is] intended without question to point to the author [her]self."³⁸ It is "poetry of suffering" that makes the poet's "psychological vulnerability... an embodiment of [her] civilization."³⁹

The sudden pull of death which Sexton felt in "The Operation" finds a more prominent expression in two other poem: "With Mercy for the Greedy," and "In the Deep Museum." Sexton is not afraid of death. She rather welcomes it as it will pave the way for her union with God. In "With Mercy for the Greedy," the

allurement to unite with God is the central theme. Sexton's desire to unite with God becomes all the more intense in the poem "In the Deep Museum." Fed with up with the world, the poet longs for taking shelter in God. This longing reaches a feverish pitch. She goes on even to lose her consciousness, feeling as if she were dead. But she does not remain in this state for long. As the shadows of the painful world of reality encroach her mind, her dream-state is broken. She wakes to find herself in the Inferno of madness struggling for her own salvation.

My God, my God, what queer corner am I in?
Didn't I die, blood running down the post,
lungs gagging for air, die there for the sin
of anyone, my sour mouth giving up the ghost?
Surely my body is done? Surely I died?

(SP 59)

Sexton's desire for death should be interpreted in broader context. Sexton does not love death for the sake of death. She wants to die as death will facilitate her to begin a new and eternal life with God.

Sexton's desire to live is further reinforced in the poems belonging to the second phase of her poetic career, the Period of Conflicting Instincts. Though her life is still suspended between life and death, it is her will to live that comes to the fore. This conflict between life and death is embodied in her trilogy Live or Die (1966), Love Poems (1969), and Transformation (1971). Sexton's recovery from her mental illness was only partial. All that her exploration of the self and consciousness of loss, guilt, fear etc. could give was only an uncertain balance of mind. She was still plagued with the question of "to be" or "not to be." Continuously for four years i.e. from 1961 to 1965, she was condemned to an

emotional illness, suffering from the attacks of "fear, and despair, and suicidal depression."⁴⁰ During this period, she was involved in an intricate "journey in and out of the dark."⁴¹ She had to endure the harrowing experiences, similar to the Dark Night of the Soul, described by the mystics.

For complete recovery she now switches as her attention from her personal self to her domestic self. Subsequently in the first book of this trilogy Live or Die she undertakes a "resolute dredging of a complex domestic past,"⁴² in search for self identity. The theme of this search, she underlines through the epigraph of the book taken from an early draft of Saul Bellow's Herzog:

With one long breath, caught and held
in the chest, he fought his sadness over
his solitary life. Don't cry, you idiot!
Live or Die, but don't poison everything.⁴³

Interestingly this quotation was sent by Saul Bellow as a piece of personal advice to Sexton, urging her to take a firm decision and not to disturb other men's lives and poison their delights. Moved by this advice, she reconsidered the old questions of guilt, madness, death, love, cancer, sex, suicide, in order purge them and to take firm decision in favour of life.

Live or Die is a "diary like book" charting Sexton's "inner and outer lives between January 1962 to February 1966,"⁴⁴ rendering direct account of her father's death, along with the death of her teacher John Holmes and the sad suicide of her friend Sylvia Plath. It also embodies references to her comforts of drug addiction, her attempted suicide, and her guilt-consciousness towards her mother and daughter. In the poems of this book, the personal and psychological notes are so

strong that they appear as "conversations with her psychiatrist,"⁴⁵ or "documents of modern psychiatry."⁴⁶

The first poem of the volume, "Flee on Your Donkey" derives its title from Rimbaud's Fetes de la faim. It is structured on her own madness, life in the mental asylum, mother's cancer, father's alcoholic tendencies, doctor's efforts, and her inner-most desire to escape from the drag-net of mental illness. In the hospital, Sexton is overtaken by a sense of loneliness and alienation, which becomes all the more acute, as she broods over her pretty ones who are dead and have left her alone in this world. Now there are no friends and relatives but only her poems to nurse her:

Everyone has left me
Except my muse,
That good nurse
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse

(SP 75)

Memories of her dead parents flit through her mind. She remembers with an acute sense of pain how her mother was carried like a doll:

Meanwhile,
They carried out my mother,
wrapped like somebody's doll, in sheets,
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.

(SP 77)

She goes on to mention the alcoholic habits of her father:

My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood
he used up on other women in the Middle West.
He went out, a cured old alcoholic
on crooked feet and useless hands.

(SP 77)

Sexton continues to be obsessed with her ambivalent attitude towards her parents. The Electra in her hates her mother violently but as the normal daughter she treats the mother as her alter ego. Much in the same way like Electra, she is deeply attached to her father but like a normal daughter she shows normal feelings. This ambivalence also surfaces in her attitude towards her doctor who is at once, a Christ and a father-figure:

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was.

(SP 77)

She recalls how she was rescued by the doctor, when she collapsed outside his office:

I lay there
like an overcoat
that someone had thrown away.
You carried me back in,

(SP 78)

But Sexton's mind does not brood over her past for long. It returns to the present but finds no relief. She feels that life in a hospital is rather intolerable. The cumulative experience of her past and present induces her to flee from the ugly life in the hospital.

Anne, Anne,
flee on your donkey,
flee this sad hotel,

Ride out
any old way your please!
In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.
That's what it means to be crazy.

(SP 81)

Ambivalence marks Sexton's attitude towards her teacher Holmes as well. He was a father figure as well as a butt of ridicule. But when he died of throat cancer, she commemorated her death in an elegiac poem titled "Somewhere in Africa" with reverence and piety in terms which anticipate her poem The Awful Rowing towards God. Sexton envisions her teacher being carried in a boat by the "female God." In a master stroke, she blends the idea of mortality with immortality, asserting that "the funeral cannot-kill":

Let her take you. She will put twelve strong men at the oars
for you are stronger than mahogany and your bones fill
the boat high as with fruit and bark from the interior.
She will have you now, you whom the funeral cannot kill.

(SP 82)

In Sexton, death is always linked with a sense of release and union with God. She welcomes death because it will free her from the bondages of womanhood. In "consorting with Angels," she tells us how tired she is with the role of a woman:

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.

(SP 83)

Her tired spirit finds relief in a dream in which the poet finds herself in an unknown city. With chains fastened around her, she loses her common gender:

lying down on the gates of the city.
Then the chains were fastened around me
and I lost my common gender and my final aspect.

(SP 83)

The thought of death and womanhood leads her mind to Virgin Mary, whom she consciously or unconsciously identifies with her dead mother. In the poem "For the Year of the Insane," subtitled "a prayer," she conceives of death as purifying water:

In the mind there is a thin alley called death
and I move through it as
through water.

(SP 92)

Purification, being a precondition to spiritual death also entails the realization of the futility of the female body:

My body is useless.

(SP 92)

Like Many American poets including Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, Sexton does not consider death as a terrible devil, but as an agent of union with God. She wants to surrender her body to death as her friend Sylvia Plath surrendered her life to the oven. She comes to develop a precise philosophy of death, which she unfolds in the poems written in the aftermath of Sylvia's suicide. The first, "Wanting to Die," is a dramatic monologue, which explores the tools of death and expresses her grief of the sad end of her friend:

But suicide have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build.

(SP 98)

She feels that Plath is waiting for arrival:

and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately under an old wound,

to empty my breath from its bad prison.

(SP 98)

Sexton returns to ventilate her ambivalence towards her parents demonstrating her hatred alternating with her love. Her hatred towards her father and mother is rooted in her very childhood. She did not have the benefit of the parental love as she had been sent to a boarding school. This denial of parental love made her mentally and emotionally cripple, causing physical repercussions. Expressing her sense of frustration, she writes in "Cripples and Other Stories":

I was an instant cripple
from my finger to my shoulder.
The laundress wept and swooned.
My mother had to hold her.

I knew I was a cripple.
Of course, I'd known it from the start.
My father took the crowbar
and broke that wringer's heart.

(SP 110)

Nevertheless, Sexton continues to worship her father for the perfection of his personality.

Sexton frequently accused her mother of her failure to establish a healthy communication between them. For the communication gap Sexton could never understand her mother. There were only two occasions on which she developed some sort of understanding with her. But it was too late:

My mother knew me twice
and then I had to leave her.

(SP 111)

Likewise, Sexton finds a similar communication gap with her daughter as well. After a long absence, when her daughter Joyce returns to her house and meets her mother she does not recognise her. She mistakes Sexton as a stranger.

The girl is so terrified that she cries for help. Sexton is terribly upset and goes on to express her grief in the poem "Pain for a Daughter" with great emotion:

I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries...
Oh my God, help me!
Where a child would have cried Mama!
Where a child would have believed Mama!

(SP 113)

With this renewed sense of guilt and frustration and an instinctive love of spiritual death, the equilibrium of Sexton's mind is again disturbed. The poet finds herself again in the mental asylum. However, after reading the letter of Saul Bellow, incorporating an excerpt from his *Herzog*, the balance is restored. Sexton now leaves the thought of death and begins to knock the doors of life. In her poem "Live," especially in its second part, Sexton visualizes a fresh opening of life:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.

(SP 117)

And this answer is

I say Live, Live because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift.

(SP 119)

This dream which now she dreams is the dream of an eternal life in God.

With her faith restored in life, Sexton's attitude towards life becomes somewhat optimistic. Her tone becomes less bitter. Though she remains concerned with a sense of isolation, her mood changes radically. "She has abandoned," writes Robert Phillips, "her previous preoccupations with ancestry,

madness, and partial recovery. Most of these latest pieces are ironic love poems, speaking more of alienation than of conciliation, more of loneliness than togetherness."⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Sexton's attitude towards life still suffers from an imbalance. For her life remains a mixture of pain and pleasure. Undoubtedly there are chances of rebirth, but this rebirth is always paradoxical, since it involves the process of digging the buried self. In her new volume, Love Poems (1969), Sexton shows "an awareness of the possibly good as well as the possibly rotten."⁴⁸ As she herself has commented, "inherent in the process is a rebirth of a sense of self, each time stripping away a dead self."⁴⁹

The poems included in the next volume, Love Poems, are love poems only in an ironical sense, since they speak more of the absence of love than its presence. Nonetheless they portray love in its different guises, "sensual, filial, adulterous self and the impossibility of reciprocal love."⁵⁰ Besides the different guises of love, Sexton also goes on to celebrate various states of womanhood and her loneliness. The opening poem of the volume "The Breast," reveals Sexton's laring spirit in celebrating the various part of female boys. "The Breast" expresses the sensuous feeling of a young girl at the touch of the hand of lover:

But your hands found me like an architect.

(SP 123)

The speaker seems to become alive with the touch of lover's fingers:

I am alive when your fingers are.

(SP 124)

Sexual fulfilment makes the girl unbalanced:

I am unbalanced.

(SP 124)

The touch of lover's fingers on her breast makes the speaker mad with over excessive sexual fulfilment:

I am mad the way young girls are mad,
with an offering, an offering....

(SP 124)

This sort of erotic body consciousness can also be traced in the poem titled "Touch."

Another poem dealing with the female body is "In Celebration of My Uterus," which surprised many readers. But for Sexton uterus is no longer a taboo, but a source of inspiration, since it embodies the "central creature" which gives her courage to live:

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.

(SP 125)

Among love poems, the most realized poem is "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," which poetizes the supremacy of the wife over the lover. While the wife is the emblem of permanence, the lover is the token of the ephemeral. As the embodiment of self-sacrifice, she offers flowers to her husband and takes all the thorns in her huge lap. She discharges her duty not only as a wife but also as a

mother, looking after their children who are like the delicate balloons resting on the ceiling. Thus wife is virtually a goddess or a symbol of reality:

She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

(SP 131)

While celebrating love and human body, Sexton also expresses her anger towards the male tribe for treating female bodies as the tools of sexual satisfaction. This anger finds one of its best expressions in "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman." She writes how man neglects woman after the sexual act:

.....Look
when it is over he places her,
like a phone, back on the hook.

(SP 135)

The value of the woman is limited to this act in which man and woman eat each other.

..... They turn off the light.
The glimmering creatures are full of lies.
They are eating each other. They are overfed.

(SP 137)

The poems which treat Sexton's anger against the male tribe are invariably the poems of loneliness. In some of these poems, she goes on to offer suggestion for overcoming the boredom of loneliness. One of these suggestions is embodied in "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator"⁵¹ in which the poetic persona says:

I am fed
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

(SP 136)

According to Phillips, it is "a pathetic vision." Another poem, to exemplify this pathetic vision is "December 12th." Here the poet overcomes her loneliness in the voluntary hospital work. But all the poems are not pathetic. Poems like "The Nude Swim" speak of spiritual isolation and hope.

The collection, Love Poems, also embodies a sequence of a dozen and a half short poems under the collective title, "Eighteen Days Without You." These poems remind us of Snodgrass's poems in "Heart's Needle," that like Sexton's poems, "Confessional" cycles on the enforced absence of a loved one."⁵² Sexton's Transformations, the third volume of the trilogy, is not confessional in the strict sense of the term. But, as Phillips thinks, there are verses which do at times strip the poet bare, as when she tries the wolf's descriptions in 'Red Riding Hood:

Quite collected at cocktail parties,
meanwhile in my head
I'm undergoing open heart surgery.⁵³

In the third phase of her career Sexton turns her gaze from the confessions of the physical self to the confessions of the spiritual self. She uses surrealistic images to reveal the working of the deeper self. Purgative in nature, the poems of this period embody Sexton's experience of walking from the world of madness to a world of spiritual illumination. During this phase she wrote only two books The Book of Folly (1972) and The Death Notebooks (1974). The Book of Folly includes, "Thirty Poems, "The Death of the Fathers" sequence, poems on "Angels," and The Jesus Papers.

However, all these poems, though in different ways, combine to exemplify Sexton's idea of purgation, which is a precondition to religious illumination. Her

idea of purgation is akin to Frost's idea of purgation by fire and water, as expressed in his poem "Fire and Ice" which serves as an epigraph to The Book of Folly. But Sexton uses fire and ice in a figurative sense with fire standing for passion and ice for hate and death. Sexton begins this volume by expressing her desire to escape from this world just like a bird ("The Ambition Bird"). She wants to go to a world of peace and pleasure. But her escape can be cut short by the ghosts of her memory. Hence before her flight she has to exorcise these ghosts once for all.

First of these terrible ghosts is the doctor, her psychiatrist. Now the doctor, as exemplified in the poem "The Doctor of the Heart," no longer kindles in her heart a feeling of love and reverence, as he did in earlier doctor-poems "You Doctor Martin" and "Flee on Your Donkey." Naturally Sexton's attitude towards him becomes rough and furious. For her doctor is a repulsive and unwelcome figure for she no longer needs his expert advice:

Take away your knowledge Doktor
It doesn't butter me up."⁵⁴

Another figure which Sexton finds standing in the way of her spiritual voyage is her mother. As portrayed in earlier poems like "The Double Image" and "The Operation," she was obsessed with guilt consciousness. But now she wants not only to get rid of the guilt consciousness but also to remove her (mother's) spectre of the mother from her mind. Sexton expresses this desire through the poem "Dreaming the Breasts." She has now put a pad lock on her mother so that the white ponies go galloping and galloping:

I have put a padlock
On you, Mother, dear dead human,
so that your great bells,
those dear white ponies,
can go galloping, galloping,
Wherever you are.

(SP 179)

Sexton also writes about poetry which has been her liberating god throughout the period of her mental illness. Poetic words had been for long her protectors from the demon of death. But now the same poetry is failing her at crucial moments, as words become silent and "leak out of it like a miscarriage":

I am filling the room
with the words from my pen.
Words leak out of it like a miscarriage.
I am zinging words out into the air
and they come back like squash balls.
Yet there is silence.
Always silence.
Like an enormous baby mouth.

(SP 180)

Sexton also exorcises the ghost of her father in the "Death of the Fathers" sequence. Indeed the memories of her life with her father appeared as the most terrible ghost, stalking in the path of spiritual quest in her father who awakened the sleeping womanhood in her mind and killed her childhood and who made her sex conscious, producing in her the incestuous desire of an Electra. Her new attitude towards her father is radically different from the earlier one. It appears in such poems as "Oysters," "How We Danced," and "Santa." After reliving the memories of the moments of intense erotic attachment with her father, she comes to visualize him as a saint and a signal man, symbolizing Sexton's change of the track of her journey from physical to the spiritual. "She writes in "Santa":

and large children hang their stockings
and build a black memorial to you.
And you, you fade out of sight
like a lost signalman
wagging his lantern
for the train that comes no more.

(SP 186)

In "The Jesus Papers," the religious note which appears as an undercurrent in earlier books, comes to the fore. The poems embodied in the volume celebrate Sexton's close kinship with Jesus. Sexton always regarded Jesus as her companion, to be precise, her fellow sufferer and confessor. He made confession with his body much in the same way as Sexton made her confessions with words. The theme of their common suffering figures in "Jesus Asleep" which reveals Jesus's intense desire to be united with his mother Mary. But Jesus's desire was fulfilled only after his death. Likewise, Sexton also comes to realize that her union with Jesus would be possible only after her death. Therefore she resolves to accept death willingly:

..... He had not known Mary
they were united at His death,
the cross to the woman,
in a final embrace.
poised forever
Like a centerpiece.

(SP 193)

Her intense desire to realize God reaches its feverish pitch, when she expresses her longing to kiss God. In "Jesus Dies," she writes:

I want to kiss God on His nose and watch His sneeze

I want God to put His streaming arms around Me

(SP 197)

Sexton's attitude towards Jesus is ambivalent. Even though she does not regard Jesus, as God she regards him as her friend and fellow sufferer. But sometimes she considers him as her adversary and finds herself interlocked in a struggle. The cow envisioned by the poet in her dream is not a milk-giver but blood giver. Thus Christ for her becomes a double symbol, the harbinger of victory as well of danger:

We must all eat sacrifices.
We must all eat beautiful women.

(SP 200)

However, it is not an ordinary physical death that can unite Sexton with Jesus or God, but an illuminated death which she goes on to define in The Death Notebooks, the book of her life time that incorporates her last will and testament. This illuminated death does not bring the tremors of terror but the music of life. Sexton reveals the secrets of the illuminated death chiefly through the poems and sequences "The Furies" and "O Ye Tongues."

The opening poem of The Death Notebooks, "Gods," reveal Sexton's spiritual quest, a theme which also informs some other important poems. This quest takes several forms. In "Making a Living," Sexton wants to follow the path of Jonah, as she finds striking similarities between her life and that of Jonah. Interestingly the Christian saint, one of the most popular biblical figures, recommended confession as an instrument for redemption and treated death as an instrument of revelation. In her attempt to identify herself with Jonah, she puts the following words in his mouth:

This is my death,
Jonah said out loud,
and it will profit me to understand it.
I will make a mental note of each detail.⁵⁵

Since death is an agent of liberation, Sexton is not fearful at all. She welcomes death as her lover who will relieve her from the earthly prison. This realization reinforces her death wish. Sexton's tender feelings for her lover (death) surface in "For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open," in a remarkable way:

Now your beer belly hangs out like Fasto.
You are popping your buttons and expelling gas.
How can I lie down with you, my comical beau
when you are so middle-aged and lower-class.

(SP 204)

But in the sequence, "The Death Baby," Sexton conceives of death in terms of Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," which treats it not only with tenderness but looks at it with fear as well. In the last poem of the sequence "Baby," she invests death with a double symbol, projecting it, as a delicate baby with a terrible face:

Beware. Beware.
There is a tenderness
There is a love.
for this dumb traveler
waiting in his pink covers.

(SP 209)

The concluding lines of the poem envision the exact time when the speaker would realize the necessity of hugging death:

Some-day,
heavy with cancer or disaster
I will look up at Max
and say: It is time.

Hand me the death baby
and there will be
that final rocking.

(SP 209)

The persona of the poem seems to devote herself to the seductiveness of the death baby. The phrase "final rocking" reveals Sexton's conscious choice of her death in her own fashion. "Likewise the choice of the moment of death is an unconscious decision, by a living being."⁵⁶

As Sexton tells us in the last two sequences, "The Furies" and "O Ye Tongues," such a death is not physical, but spiritual, i.e. the death of "I-ness" or the ego-sense. Thus her conception of death is not physical but mystic. However, before realizing her mystic death, she has to pass through the memory lane of her physical experiences celebrating the beauty of male and female bodies. She also recalls different aspects of death and goes on to experience the dark night in which she eventually loses her faith in God. Sometimes she is overwhelmed with the frenzy of suicide which for her is the only way to end her life. Nevertheless, towards the end of the sequence, she recovers her faith in life and determines to cling to it. She resolves:

Not to die, not to die.

(SP 215)

Nevertheless, this victory over death is only short-lived. Sexton returns to her old position, believing that death is the only way to the eternal life. In "Clothes" she goes on to express her intension to commit suicide and to go to God as a clean one, wearing clean clothes:

Put on a clean shirt
before you die, some Russian said.
Nothing with drool, please,
no egg spots, no blood,
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean, God,
so I'll try to comply.

(SP 216)

This cleanliness is only symbolic. Sexton longs for the liberation of her body from physical bondages and for the purification of her mind from guilt consciousness. In this purified condition, she wants to proceed on her journey towards the abode of the Almighty:

And I'll take
my painting shirt
washed over and over of course
spotted with every yellow kitchen I've painted.
God, you don't mind if I bring all my kitchens?
They hold the family laughter and the soup.

(SP 216)

With her ideas of death and divinity crystallized, Sexton now goes on to offer her prayers to God. In the ten psalms of the last sequence "O Ye Tongues," modelled after Jubilate Agno by the eighteenth century English poet, Christopher Smart, Sexton praises God for the creation of this world and its objects. At the same time, she also feels a close kinship with Smart who enabled her to find the cure for the ills of her life. With him she also comes to understand the secret of death, realizing that death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new life. In the "Tenth Psalm," she writes:

For death comes to friends, to parents, to sisters.
Death comes with its bagful of pain yet they do
not curse the key they were given to hold.

For they open each door and it gives them a
new day at the yellow window.

(SP 224)

Obviously, death is a monster from whose clutches, no body can escape. But for Smart and Sexton, it is a key which opens the door of God's abode. Hence death is not the agent of disruption but of union.

The fourth phase of Sexton's poetic career marks the period of collapsing rationality. It is a period in which she comes not only to realize the complete divinity of Christ but also her union with him. Jesus for her had been the ideal and goal of her confessional quest at one and the same time. Sexton embodies her experience of this union in her last poem of her poetic voyage, The Awful Rowing toward God. In this book Sexton provides universal dimensions to her confessionalism. The Awful Rowing towards God is the summation of Sexton's spiritual journey which begins with the confessions of her body and ends with her soul's union with Christ or God. She starts with the account of her childhood deprivations, loneliness, and her woeful ignorance of God hidden in her own self. She tells us that in spite of enormous impediments and obstacles, she continued her journey in the form of the quest for her father which eventually culminated into quest for God. She wanted to find key to open the door of God's palace:

And a Key
a very large key,
that opens something –
some useful door –
somewhere –
up there –

(SP 232)

In the beginning, Sexton believed that God was outside herself. But in "When Man Enters Woman," she comes to realize the presence of God within herself. This realization, produces in her an intense longing for union with him for which she seeks the help of Virgin Mary. She prays her to remove all the obstacles in the way of her marriage with Jesus, telling the Virgin that she is tired of the cycles of death and rebirth, and now she wants a true rebirth or a true marriage to end this process of miserable life:

I have been born many times, a false Messiah,
but let me be born again
into something true.

(SP 237)

Continuing her journey, Sexton in her poem "Frenzy," finds herself very close to the temple of God. With her unflinching faith and her sincere prayers, she overcomes all the hurdles and reaches the dock of the island. In "The Rowing Endeth," she moors her "rowboat/at the dock of the island called God" (SP 242). At this stage she feels that all her wounds are healed with the surge of confidence. Subsequently she leaves her wooden boat to unite herself with God. At last, Sexton achieves the supreme moment of her life. This moment comes when God welcomes her to his abode:

"On with it!" He says and thus
we squat on the rocks by the sea.

(SP 242)

Sexton's joy knows no bounds, as she is invited by God to play the game of poker. She accepts the offer with great pleasure. Interestingly, the game ends in a tie, in which both feel victorious. The poem ends with laughter, a characteristic

expression of the mystic joy, felt after the union with God. As the game ends, both players begin to laugh:

a game of poker.
He calls me.
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
He wins because He holds five aces.

He starts to laugh,
the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth
and into mine,
and such laughter that He doubles right over me
laughing a Rejoice - Chorus at our two triumphs.

(SP 242)

Sexton's world which once was filled with darkness is now suffused with light. She finds that their laughter reverberates throughout the universe. She goes on to hear the echoes of that untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha - ha -" (SP 242). In this way Sexton achieves the goal of her life, a union with God.

In nutshell, Sexton's confessional poetry is both cathartic and religious. It is inspired by a desire not only to purify herself from the physical, emotional, and mental experience which make her ill but also to achieve union with God. Evidently Sexton models her confessionalism on the physical sufferings of Jesus Christ. She wants to accomplish with her soul, what Jesus accomplished with his body. Sexton's process of purification and quest for union passes through four different phases or periods: of apprenticeship, conflicting instinct, religious consciousness, and collapsing rationality.

In the first book written during the period of Apprenticeship, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sexton embodies her experiences of mental illness, especially

madness and partial recovery from it. In the second book Pretty Ones, she describes the causes of this madness. Since she feels that she was driven to this state by her dear ones, she expresses a sense of remorse and guilt followed by a feeling of loss and fear. In the second phase, The Period of Conflicting Instincts, Sexton poetizes her dilemma, her constant wavering between life and death. In the poems of Live or Die, she gives expression to this tormenting experience. But ultimately she becomes tired of the thought of death and resolves to respond to the music of life. It is this optimism which informs Love Poems.

In the poems written during the third phase of her poetic career, Sexton celebrates her religious consciousness, which comes to the fore after her decision to confront life and to make religious confessions. She embodies this experience in The Book of Folly and The Death Notebooks. In the former, Sexton includes confessional poems using surrealistic images. Exorcising the ghosts of parents and friends once again and underlining the limitations of poetic expression, she wants to seek refuge in Virgin Mary and Christ. Through the various sequences, incorporated in the book, she endeavours to cultivate the idea of God. However, it is only in the second book, The Death Notebooks, the achievement of her life time that she comes to understand the meaning of death and union with God. In the fourth phase, which marks The Period of Collapsing Rationality, Sexton achieves the goal of her confessionalism, union with God. In the poems of The Awful Rowing towards God, she sums up her life-long quest, her problems, difficulties, and ordeals that continuously punctuated her troublesome journey. In the end she gives expression to her tremendous joy felt after her union with God. Thus her

confessional poetry, which was seemingly shallow and meaningless, becomes the vehicle of the deep experiences of the soul.

Chapter 2 – Notes

¹Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 1: hereafter cited as Hall.

²Anne Sexton, A Self-Portrait in Letters, ed. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979) 43: hereafter cited as Self-Portrait.

³Hall 3.

⁴Hall 3.

⁵Sexton, qtd. Hall 3.

⁶Sexton, qtd. Hall 3.

⁷Sexton, qtd. Hall 3.

⁸Self-Portrait 5.

⁹Hall 5.

¹⁰Hall 5.

¹¹Self-Portrait 5.

¹²Hall 6.

¹³Hall 7.

¹⁴Self-Portrait 8.

¹⁵Sexton, qtd. Hall 9.

¹⁶Hall 10.

¹⁷Hall 10.

¹⁸Hall 12.

¹⁹Sexton, To Bedlam and Part Way Back (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960) 13: hereafter cited as Bedlam with paginations.

²⁰Hall 13.

²¹Sexton, qtd. Hall 13-14.

²²Frost, qtd. Hall 14.

²³Hall 16.

²⁴Hall 19.

²⁵Hall 19.

²⁶Self-Portrait 23.

²⁷Self-Portrait 22.

²⁸Self-Portrait 22.

²⁹Hall 22.

³⁰Self-Portrait 25.

³¹Self-Portrait 25.

³²Anne Sexton, Selected Poems of Anne Sexton, ed. With an Introduction by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988) 39: hereafter the book cited as SP and introduction as Diane and Diana.

³³Shakespeare, qtd. Hall 42.

³⁴Franz Kafka, qtd. Hall 42.

³⁵Diana Hume George, Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 29: hereafter cited as George.

³⁶Sexton, Interview with Harry Moore, No Evil Star: Selected Essays Interview, and Prose, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1985) 49: hereafter interview cited as Moore and books as Colburn.

³⁷Hall 39.

³⁸M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 26: hereafter cited as Rosenthal

³⁹Rosenthal 79.

⁴⁰Hayden Carruth, review "On Live or Die, Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 130: hereafter the review cited as Carruth and the book as McClatchy.

⁴¹Thomas P. McDonnell, review "On Live or Die," McClatchy 135: hereafter cited as McDonnell.

⁴²Robert Boyers, review "On Live or Die," McClatchy: 204 hereafter cited as Boyers.

⁴³Saul Bellow, qtd. Hall 55.

⁴⁴Philips 80-81.

⁴⁵Hall 55.

⁴⁶Heyen and Al Poulin, Interview "With William Heyen and Al Poulin, No Evil Star, 152: hereafter cited as Heyen and Poulin.

⁴⁷Philips 82.

⁴⁸Beverly Fields, qtd. Philips 82.

⁴⁹Beverly Fields, qtd. Philips 82.

⁵⁰Philips 83.

⁵¹Philips 83.

⁵²Philips 88.

⁵³Philips 91.

⁵⁴Sexton, The Book of Folly (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974) 5: hereafter cited as The Book of Folly.

⁵⁵Sexton, The Death Notebooks (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974) 3-4: hereafter cited as The Death Notebooks.

⁵⁶George 183.

CHAPTER 3

ANNE SEXTON'S LITERARY TECHNIQUES

As a concept and poetic genre confessionalism might have been old; but as a form of expression it is most modern. In view of the inadequacy of the poetic conventions of Modernism to express the fragmentation of modern consciousness, it developed its own forms and techniques. It discarded the rational, objective, and indirect approach of Modernism and accepted an emotional, subjective, and direct approach. Most of the confessional poets rejected the practices of maintaining aesthetic distance, and anonymity, and the technique of finding objective correlative for a particular mental state. According to Irving Howe, they stressed self exposure and self assault as a gesture for authenticity. Confessional poets became attentive to their feelings rather than to their thoughts. It was the bared breast and not an active heat which became central to them.

In a way the confessional poets were engaged in a poetic revolution which aimed at knocking down barriers of subject matter and its expression. While in case of subject matter, they concentrated on the history of their own self, in case of expression they removed psychological barriers and poetic artifice that arrested the free flow of poetic consciousness. On psychological level the poet was confronted by such defense mechanism as repression, displacement, suppression, condensation, projection etc. On artistic level he was allured by such poetic devices as paradox, ambiguity, ellipsis, allusion, wit etc. Steering clear from both

of them, he had to carve out his own poetic way to express the experiences of his untrammelled self. The confessional poets including Sexton turned towards open forms. J.D. McClatchy writes:

In general, it can be said of Sexton's poems, as of other confessional poems, that the patterns they assume and by which they manage their meanings are those which more closely follow the actual experiences they are recreating – forms that can include and reflect direct, personal experience; a human, rather than a disembodied voice; the dramatic presentation of the flux of time and personality; and the drive toward sincerity. By this last concept is meant not an ethical imperative, but the willed and willing openness of the poet to her experience and to the character of the language by which her discoveries are revealed and shared.¹

That is to say, the new poets or for this matter confessional poets adopted personal history or autobiography as their central theme and direct expression as their method. According to Stephen Stepanchev they allowed their emotions to take their own form without the interference of reason. To quote him:

These new poets prized experience in all its rawness and directness allowing it to acquire meaning and form in the imagination. The poet placed himself with particularity, avoiding all obvious universality.²

The confessional poets went on to develop their own conception of poetry, their own poetical structures, language, technique, imagery and diction. On her part Sexton experimented with new techniques to express the divided sensibility of the modern era by her own example. Interestingly, she proceeded with a new interpretation of poetics. Traditionally, poetry had been regarded as an aesthetic experience, derived from aesthetic subjects that find expression in aesthetic terms. But Sexton moved away from this conception. Pleading that poetry should be concerned more with the 'invisible' than with the 'visible,' she gave us a new

vision. For her the central point of poetry should be not beauty but truth. For it is truth which reveals human personality. Nevertheless, Sexton did not stand for partial truth but the whole truth which hides nothing. For the poet, who is engaged in the persistent search for truth, there is no limitation, no taboo or forbidden subjects.

Sexton believed that the poet should ensure a free flow of sensibility. The walls which separate the conscious from the unconscious should be knocked down by the poetic effort. The poet should dig not only the conscious mind but also the unconscious part of it to know the mysteries of human personality. That is to say, poetry should flow un-impeded, unchecked from the conscious and the unconscious alike revealing the whole being of the poet. Sexton's confessionalism became a revolutionary attempt to bring under the aesthetic orbit subjects which were hitherto considered as unpoetic and forbidden. Poetry before Sexton was simply incapable of embodying the whole truth. It was Sexton who used poetry as an instrument for exploring the totality of human experience. Subsequently, she went on to define poetry as an "ax" to cut the frozen sea within the human psyche.

She told Barbara Kevles:

As Kafka said about prose, "A book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us." And that's what I want from a poem. A poem should serves as the ax for the frozen sea within us.³

In order to melt, this frozen sea within, Sexton uses all the tricks of her poetic trade. Though she speaks of the full and free flow of unmediated experience, she uses poetic techniques to channelize it in a mediated direction to serve her confessional demands. No wonder, she thinks of a poet as trickster who

uses everything to cheat his or her readers as well as herself: Sexton minces no words when she confesses her practice of poetic cheating to Gregory Fitz Gerald:

And I cheat; or if I haven't cheated, I'll cheat later, so no one can see this dreadful dreck I'm doing.⁴

As examples of her cheating she cites such poems as "The Double Image," "The Division of Parts," in To Bedlam and Part Way Back and "Eighteen Days Without You" in Love Poems. She goes on to reveal her trick or the way she deceives her readers in the following words:

I write the first stanza; here it is. Then I count out the syllables. I make it look like I feel it. If I want to, I can suddenly break it and go into something else. It's mere dreckery to get the poem out, which is the important thing. At first I don't plan anything out. But once it's there, then I figure it all out. If you start going down the page, it's very easy to see me cheating, writing eight or nine or four.⁵

For Sexton, cheating is a double process in which the readers as well as the poet are deceived by poetic tricks. If the reader is deceived by the manipulation of verbal sounds or the rhyming scheme, the poet herself is deceived by the form of the poems. She wrote about this formal trick in an article for the Poetry Book Society: "Form for me is a trick to deceive myself, not you, but me." Elaborating this idea, Sexton tells Patricia Marx:

I can explain that exactly. I think all form is a trick in order to get at the truth. Sometimes in my hardest poems, the ones that are difficult to write, I might make an impossible scheme, a syllabic count that is so involved that it then allows me to be truthful. It works as a kind of superego. It says, "You may now face it, because it will be impossible ever to get out." Almost any accomplished poet can do this. The point is can you get to the real, the sharp edge of the poem? But you see how I say this not to deceive you, but to deceive me. I deceive myself, saying to myself you can't do it, and then if I can get it then I have deceived myself, then I can change it and do

what I want. I can even change and rearrange it so no one can see my trick. It won't change what's real. It's there on paper.⁶

Besides poetic tricks, another important feature of Sexton's craft is the poetic process of expansion and revision. For her writing poetry is not a smooth process but something arduous and manipulative. In order to express herself properly, she expands her subject and also indulges in pruning. Her poetic slogan, as she tells William Packard, is: "Expand, expand, cut, cut, expand, expand, cut,⁷ cut." She does not trust first drafts, presumably because they are incomplete. Her poetic strategy of expansion and cutting is meant to trap ideas and thereafter to undergo a process of selection. Explaining her real poetic design Polly C. Williams writes:

One of her fundamental approach to writing was that one should expand for the sake of expansion. Only when the pages were overflowing with ideas and images should one go back and slice, cut, alter, and delete. If the poem or story still was not right, one should again expand, expand, expand. It is the process itself, not the motivation or ultimate objective that enables one to discover the stimulating image and correct line.⁸

For Sexton writing poetry is a game which she has to play with full determination. She gives a very interesting account of this game to William Packard: "The game I do play is I say to myself. This poem is too hard to write. It is impossible for me, I can't do it. Then I start fooling around with same stanzas, running a syllable count. I use syllables and rhyme. I get a good beginning to the poem. Then I say to myself. But I can't do the poem it's too hard. I use this as a kind of superego. Then I proceed to do the poem. I make up the game, and then I don't follow it too carefully. Games don't get me involved. It's always the

content that gets me involved. I make up the game to go along with the content. I start every poem with a powerful emotion. I write in the morning. I use yellow paper, sometimes lined school paper. I write at the typewriter and make extensive corrections. I sit at a desk, my feet up on a bookcase. I have cigarettes, naturally, burned down to one long gray ash."⁹

This game of writing poetry is not only tricky but also a long one. The process of expanding and cutting goes on for a long time. Sometimes Sexton had to revise her work for hundred times. In the beginning of her career she took several days, sometimes weeks to finish a poetic piece. For her the most difficult part of her poetic process was invariably its beginning. She took as she tells Patricia Marx, inordinately a long time to start a poem:

Oh, that's a terrible question! I don't know. Sometimes you get a line, a phrase, sometimes you're crying, or it's the curve of a chair that hurts you and you don't know why, or sometimes you just want to write a poem, and you don't know that it's about. I will fool around on the typewriter. It might take me ten pages of nothing, of terrible writing, and then I'll get a line, and I'll think, "That's what I mean!" What you're doing is hunting for what you mean, what you're trying to say. You don't know when you start.¹⁰

Even in short pieces like lyrics expressing a simple emotion, she had to waste hundreds of pages before shaping the poem in its finished form. The problems she forced ranged from realizing the central theme to the linguistic problems like selecting the images and metaphors. With each revision she had to go deeper and deeper into her psyche. Her poems, which were appeared as spontaneous emotional overflows, were actually the embodiments of her tireless exercises in composition, involving hard intellectual labour:

I work on it a very long time. For one lyric poem I rewrote about three hundred typewritten pages. Often I keep my worksheets, so that one in a while when I get depressed and think that I'll never write again, I can go back and see how that poem came into being. You watch the work and you watch the miracle. You have to look back at all those bad words, bad metaphors, everything started wrong, and then see how it came into being, the slow progress of it, because you're always fighting to find out what it is that you want to say. You have to go deeper and deeper each time. You wonder why you didn't drown at the time – deeper and deeper.¹¹

Anne Sexton uses poetic tricks not only in the poetic process but also in the manipulation of the subject matter. For her, as we have marked earlier, poets are cheats, crooks, and liars. They are like carpenters who make a tree, with "used furniture."¹² Sexton also used literal truths to get at the roots of the emotional truth which are central to her poetic endeavour. In the process of inclusion and exclusion, she inserts many episodes and events which are from her world of imagination and prunes away a number of events which form the part of her real experience. She did it for making her poetry sharp-edged capable of digging out her buried self:

Well, I think this is necessary. It's something that an artist must to do make it clear and dramatic and to have the effect of the ax. To have that effect you must distort some of these facts to give them their own clarity. As an easy example, in my long poem to my daughter and about my mental illness, I don't imply that I was ever in an institution more than once, but that was the dramatic truth. The actual truth was something quite different. I returned quite a few times, and the fact that I have two children was not mentioned in this, because the dramatic point was I had one child, and was writing to her. It made a better poem to distort in this way. I just don't mention it. So you don't have to include everything to tell the truth. You can exclude many things. You can even lie (one can confess and lie forever) as I did in the poem of the illegitimate child that the girl had to give up. It hadn't happened to me. It wasn't true, and yet it was indeed the truth.¹³

However, in the field of poetic structure Sexton's manipulative skills were somewhat restrictive. Her innovative faculty remained engaged with simply modifying traditional structures. Without discarding the freer or the strict forms of the traditional poetics, she went on to alter them, making them responsive to confessional moods. The most significant thing about her poetic forms is that she did not proceed with a preconceived form. But during the process of composition the poem took its own form. Thus, the form of the poem came to her automatically. In her interview with Patricia Marx, she went on to assert that "[t]he story writes itself and must find its right form."¹⁴ This automatic process of finding forms is visible in the poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back. While some poems of the volume were written in a very tight form, others were written in freer or loose forms. Sexton made her intentions visible from the very first poem of the volume, "You Doctor Martin." Written in the form of a dramatic monologue, the poem reveals the female patients of the hospital. With the end rhymes like "walk," "talk," and "stalk," the poet portrays Dr. Martin's relations with her patients as also his separateness from them. She contrasts doctor's purposeful activity with the purposeless frantic activity of the speaker of the poem, the activity which suggests the movement of death:

You, Doctor Martin, walk
 from breakfast to madness. Late August,
 I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
 Where the moving dead still talk
 Of pushing their bones against the thrust
 of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
 or the laughing bee on a stalk.

(SP 9)

Sexton used this type of dramatic form for expressing her private experiences. The rhyming scheme which she used is traditional. It is written in six seven line stanzas. Each line of the first stanza ends with the rhyming scheme of a b c a a b c b. Both the end rhymes and internal rhymes together reveal the sense or the meaning throughout the poem. Interestingly, enjambment dramatizes the meaning. The rhythm of the poem is basically iambic. Sexton's use of occasional spondee. Sexton used this dramatic structure in some other poems as well. For instance, in "Kind Sir: These Woods," in the first stanza of the poem, she creates a dramatic situation of the game of children, while in the second stanza she goes on to draw out a lesson that in order to find oneself, one is required first to lose oneself. In her 1959 letter to Nolan Miller, she writes about her preference for this type of dramatic organization:

I do have a feeling for stories, for plot, and may be the dramatic situation. I really prefer dramatic situations to anything else. Most poets have a thought that they dress in... imagery... But I prefer people in a situation, in a doing, a scene, a losing or a gain, and then, in the end, find the thought (the thought I didn't know I had until I wrote the story).¹⁵

Furthermore, the poem in its four quatrains uses the traditional rhyming scheme of a b a b, c d c d, e f e f, c c g g.

After making persistent efforts, it was only in the poem "The Double Image," that Sexton found a new form by blending music with traditional or strict form. This new symphonic structure became her real form for time to come. However, before finding this form, she had to struggle for sometime. In her

interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, she tells us how she was able to develop symphonic structure:

"The Double Image" is written in very strict form, and that I didn't know much I made up my own form I worked very hard from section to section, it being a long poem, to have a different pace. I didn't think of it when I was writing it, but in retrospect I guess I was trying to give it a symphonic quality. Something in me said, jeepers, you're not going to go on forever! Now let's do this. I'm pushing for the reality, the truth, and yet I'm trying to change it a little – not just the rhythm – not anything that easy.¹⁶

Many critics admired the symphonic structure of "The Double Image." May Swenson believed that the form of poetry should not be tortured but musical, as one finds in this particular poem:

The form of this poem is bare and pure, musical and not tortured. It is a revelatory and healing poem and quite different in tone from anything else in the book.¹⁷

Sexton continued to introduce variations of the symphonic form in the poems of Live or Die as well. In this book she dallied with strict and free forms of the verse. One of the most important poems of this volume, "Somewhere in Africa," is written in the form of an elegy. Sexton offered her broodings over the sudden death of her teacher John Holmes. The elegy contains seven four line stanzas with the end-rhyming scheme of a b a b, c d c d, and a rhymed couplet. Sexton used yet another kind of structure which can be defined as episodic structure. She experimented with this structure in the poems of The Book of Folly, The Death Notebooks, and The Awful Rowing towards God. Through this structure, she ensures the free-flow of her poetic sensibility which later went on assume religious and mystic overtones. It is interesting to mark, while in her strictly confessional

poems, she presented a fusion of orthodox and free forms, blending music with the versification of the strict forms. But in her poems of spiritual consciousness, she gave up old forms and relied on some newer forms of free verse which were not without a musical content.

The musical quality of Sexton's verse naturally leads to the lyrical quality of her work. In spite of her liking for dramatic structures, the essential quality of her genius was lyrical. It was her lyricism which helped her to explore the deeper layers of her psyche. She found in lyric the best mode for expressing her own feelings and emotions. She made a persistent effort to master this form. Sexton's initial failure to handle the process of lyrical composition made her despondent. However, she did not slacken her efforts. In her interview with Patricia Marx, she admits that sometimes for giving a proper shape to a lyric, she had to rewrite it in as many as three hundred type-written pages. She had to make a lot of pruning and cutting. Sexton always fought hard to make her lyric poems the embodiments of her sensibility in a clear crystal way. One of the best poems to exemplify Sexton's lyrical genius is undoubtedly "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" in Pretty Ones, which incorporates her personal feelings and emotions in an imaginative phrasing. Commenting on the poem, Caroline King Barnard Hall writes:

"To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph"... demonstrates Sexton's growing versatility and sophistication as a poet. Partly by contrast, it helps to define the nature and characteristics of the confessional mode in which she wrote the majority of the work of her first two volumes. And yet this sonnet also shows the great adaptability of the confessional mode. Like any confessional poem, lyric "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" expresses

the individual and personal emotion of the poet and offers, in its imaginative phrasing, personal expression of subjective emotion.¹⁸

Sexton was not only an artist of imaginative phrasing but also of metonymic expressions in which she used to transfer words and phrases in order to reveal the emotional truth lying underneath physical facts. One of the best poems to use metonymic phrasing is "The Operation" in All My Pretty Ones. To take an instance:

After the sweet promise,
the summer's mid retreat
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath
while I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate
my ills with hers
and decide to operate¹⁹

In a metonymy a word is substituted for something with which it is closely associated. Commenting on the poem, Hall finds out many such metonymic transfers functioning throughout the poem. In the mention of summer and winter, there is a shift from actor to setting. The 'promise' or the 'summer's mild retreat from mother's cancer' was 'sweet.' Here the rhyme of 'sweet' with 'retreat' points up the pleasant and quiet qualities of the time preceding the operation; for the daughter, the season before the surgery was fertile summer-time. Since Sexton's mother died in March 1959, the daughter was freed in the following summer from the pain of her mother's dying but was unaware during that same summer of her own approaching pain. In this opening stanza, however, the doctor

"equate[s]" the daughter's illness with the mother's and this equation of experience continues in the following stanzas."²⁰

Besides, the use of metonymy Sexton sometime made an effective use of synecdoche to make a part of experience to represent the whole. The mental illness through which she passed is not merely her private experience but the experience of the whole humanity. However, the poetic devices most central to her lyrics are the use of metaphors and imagery. Like most of the poets of third quarter of the twentieth century, Sexton used metaphors, as poetic instruments to weed out the bitter realities of her own life. Interestingly in her attempt to seek identities through her metaphors, she established some peculiar relations. For instance, she found a metaphorical relationship between the imagery of kitchen and the imagery of death and violence. To quote Ben Howard:

Her most characteristic kind of metaphor fuses imagery of violence and death with imagery of the kitchen, suggesting a close, even inevitable relationship between them.²¹

Sexton frequently used a specific central metaphor to structure her poem. For instance, in "Some Foreign Letters" included in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she uses the metaphor of life as a trick. Life, Sexton believes, is a trick, since it allures people into a dreamland, to throw them on the thorns of reality. In an extended sense, with the help of this metaphor she went on to express her sorrow for the passing character of youthful moments:

And I
see you as a young girl in a good world still,
writing three generations before mine. I try
to reach into your page and breathe it back....
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

(SP 14)

The metaphor of life as a trick goes on to define the experiences embodied in some of the other poems.

Sexton continued with her habit of metaphor-making. In "The Double Image" (rather the triple image), Sexton employed the metaphor of double image to portray the complex relationship of grandmother, mother, and daughter. The poem begins with the portrayal of Sexton as a mother, relating something to her younger daughter Joyce, something which is beyond the comprehension of a child:

I am thirty thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves to queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
flapping flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

(SP 28)

The very first stanza develops a metaphor that becomes the controlling image of the poem's first section; the suicide attempts of the mother-speaker (tenor) are identified with the falling of a few last winter leaves (vehicle). Her condition is similar to that of the yellow winter leaves, destined to die like her.

Sexton goes on to develop this metaphor in the second stanza as well. The mother feels herself guilty for her daughter's illness. She is reminded of her guilt-consciousness by the green, vigorous, and active green leaves which serve as contrast to the lifeless yellow leaves with which the speaker associates herself:

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucer;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old dept I must assume. (SP 28)

The third stanza further develops the governing metaphor of witches, that is instrumental in making her guilt-conscious. The daughter is perfectly well now, but the mother experiences her own death. The speaker is now mellowed after undergoing painful experiences for a pretty long time. She has, by now, drawn some conclusions from her sufferings. While the daughter pelts her with some uneasy questions like the ultimate destiny of leaves as well as human beings, Sexton goes on to enlighten her with the wisdom that dawned upon her mind after her troublesome life:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
He time I did not love
myself, I visited your shovelled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

(SP 29)

Evidently, the mother speaker has learnt a lot from the poignant experiences of her life. In her opinion, an individual should be brave enough to face troubles

and hurdles that come in his way of life. In her mind groaning and complaining are futile, for there is no special or personal God to listen to his complaints and prayers. The only God known to her is one's own self. Obviously, the message which Sexton wants to deliver to her daughter and people of the world is the message of self-love.

Sexton used metaphor not only to structure poems but also to lay bare her heart and portray emotional realities of her tormented life. We can find the examples of such metaphors in the Love Poems. In "The Break" she described her physical damage in a metaphorical language to mark her emotional damage. According to Robert Phillips, the literal fracture of bones goes all along with the fracture of the heart:

The physical and emotional aftermaths of an affair are conveyed in "The Break" where the literal fracture of bones parallels the metaphorical fracture of the heart. The break of the title refers, on a third level, to the severed relationship. The literal fall down the stairs, a reversal of the conventional Freudian metaphor for the sexual act, is rendered with the homely description of her fracture: I was like a box of dog bones.²²

Interestingly, Sexton exploited metaphors to suggest for the most part two radically different meanings. For instance, in "Dreaming the Breasts" embodied in The Book of Folly, mother's breasts are not only the source of life-giving milk but also of death-giving cancer. She writes:

The breasts I knew at midnight
beat like the sea in me now.
Mother, I put bees in my mouth
To keep from eating
yet it did you no good.
In the end they cut off your breasts
and milk poured from them

into the surgeon's hand
and he embraced them.
I took them from him
And planted them.

(SP 179)

The speaker of the poem further extends the metaphor which transforms the guilt-consciousness into the consciousness of a new life. The breasts which were once the source of milk and cancer becomes the source of dreams of hope and new life beyond the life of guilt symbolized by mother's breast. She envisions her mother disappearing from the scene, "galloping" on her "white ponies" (SP 179).

In some other books like The Awful Rowing towards God and 45 Mercy Street as well, Sexton made an excellent use of metaphor. The spiritual journey which she embodied in The Rowing was structured on a series of metaphors derived from mystic and religious sources or developed by her imaginative powers. In 45 Mercy Street almost every section is centred round a metaphor. The second section of the volume "Bestiary U.S.A.," contains eighteen masterpieces. Every single poem is titled after some or the other beast. Each poem extends the theme by using a central metaphor. The metaphors, used in these poems, in combination, give vent to Sexton's feelings of depression and rejection.

Besides metaphors, Sexton also excels in the use of imagery which form the heart of her poetry. Her crystal images helped her in the portrayal of the predicaments of an American woman and by extension, of the womankind of the contemporary world. The rich variety of images that she used can hardly be found elsewhere. While discussing Sexton's fantastic imagery in The Awful Rowing towards God, Ben Howard writes:

If one of Mrs. Sexton's purposes is, in fact to satirize her predicament as an American woman, she is well-assisted by her imagery, which in these last poems becomes a bizarre blend of Gothic and domestic. Here, as in her previous work, her metaphoric range is unusually wide. By turns her imagery is sentimental, sexual, violent, freakish, surreal, maternal, religious, and scatological.²³

The most distinctive quality of Sexton's images is their clarity and sharpness, capable of cutting the frozen ocean within the psychic depths. Sexton developed psychotropic images which were instrumental in digging the hidden layers of the mind. Polly C. Williams believes that the "brain storming" images of Sexton produce a tumult in the mind of readers:

Anne utilized an image provoking technique, similar to brainstorming, which revolved around the idea of approaching the image from the back door.²⁴

In her search for new images to delineate the human condition of the contemporary world, Sexton went a little too far, crossing the limits of decorum and decency. Her images did not evoke aesthetic pleasure but horror, violence, and fear. Howard writes:

More seriously, Mrs. Sexton's images evoke the horror of suburban sterility, the suppressed violence and irrational fear of a woman enmeshed in domestic routine. "Blood fingers" tie the poet's shoe; she discovers blood in her gravy; and blood flows from the kitchen pump. Mrs. Sexton has travelled leagues from Dr. Johnson, who objected to the use of the domestic "knife" in tragic drama.²⁵

As for the sources, Sexton drew imagery from varied sources of different areas. For instance, in Pretty Ones, she developed images from the domestic life as well as from the hospital life. These images covered the course of her life from the hospital to her home. All the images were so sharp that they continued to haunt the reader's mind for a long time. These images included the image of "one black-

haired tree" slipping "up like a drowned woman into the hot sky," (SP 49) in "The Starry Night" (All My Pretty Ones) and "A Canada Goose," riding up and spreading out "like a grey suede shirt" (SP 47) in "Lament" of the same volume.

Sexton's imagery is also remarkable for blending religiousness sensibility with the psychology of fear. For instance in the title poem of the aforesaid volume, All My Pretty Ones, the sacramental imagery used to sketch the portrait of her father runs parallel to the celebrations of the fear embodied in the poem. The fusion of the radically different elements of piety and fear originate from Sexton's equivocal attitude towards her father. This attitude surfaces in the poem in clear cut terms:

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

(SP 45)

According to Barnard Hall, for Sexton "her father is both her 'god' and her possible nemesis. Symbolically at Christmas, the daughter both celebrates her father and fears his alcoholic legacy." Drinking the blood of father in the sacrament, "she becomes one with him for good and for ill."²⁶

Furthermore, with the help of her imagistic patterns, Sexton overcomes her obsession with death. Her struggle to appease the fury of her death instinct finds

its best expression in the volume Live or Die. In "Live" after her dark night experiences, she ultimately emerges to visualize the dawn of a new life. She finds this life opening inside her like an egg. This image of fertility and rebirth, she provides her with three epiphanic experiences which eventually enable her to realize three roles of a woman as wife, mother, and poet. With this realization she feels as if she were an empress with a typewriter working in a perfect manner:

Here
all along,
thinking I was a killer,
anointing myself daily
with my little poisons.
But no.
I'm an empress.
I wear an apron.
My typewriter writes.

(SP 118)

Her realization is undoubtedly energized by the force of the metaphors of the sun, egg, dream, and flower which incidentally go on to structure this poem.

Sexton's mastery of the imagistic patterns can also be marked in her Love Poems. In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," she weaves a pattern of images to prove the superiority of wife over the beloved. For her sacrificing nature wife is "as real as a cast-iron pot," "whereas the beloved is as unreal as a "watercolour" (SP 131). One of the conspicuous qualities of Sexton's imagery is the use of modern images for old themes. In Transformations she adopts the metaphors of Hitler, and many such modern personages to portray the lives of old characters figuring in the old fairy tales.

Apart from metaphorical devices and imagistic patterns, Sexton also makes an effective use of such artistic instruments as irony and understatement. Robert Boyers mentions Sexton's "twin capacities for irony and love."²⁷ This irony takes the form of "an attitude of sardonic anger," which "intermittently erupts as a peculiarly laughable and better form of self mockery."²⁸ One of the best specimens of this sort of irony can be found in "The Addict" (Live or Die). With the help of this irony or mockery, Sexton tries to maintain a distance between her two selves, the real self and the thinking self. In other words irony enables her "to escape the self-absorption which has kept her a prisoner of her own fantasies and delusions."²⁹

Besides irony, Sexton also excels in the use of understatement. In the moments of emotional outbursts, she frequently exercises verbal restraint by holding back and by a tactful change of tone. With the intentional holding back of facts, Sexton embellishes truth. She allows poets not only to hold back but also to lie in order to reveal truth. In one of her poems Sexton had a brother killed in the war, though actually she had no brother. We should not be surprised to find imaginary brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, dream girls, and dream lovers in Sexton. Furthermore, she wanted to write even a disguised poem in which she intended to shift her sense of the pain of loss for one beloved to the loss of a fictitious beloved.

For laying bare her heart or open her emotional life, Sexton also makes the use of an open language, simple direct and colloquial. Generations of poets tried to hide their feelings and emotions under the dark screen of tough language. But

Sexton, and for that matter confessional poets, revealed their naked self with the help of open language almost in all the poems she wrote. She used it even in Transformations which is not a confessional poem but merely a poetic rendering of old stories. For instance, we can take an excerpt from "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and mark its simple and colloquial language:

Looking glass upon the wall...
The mirror told
and so the queen dressed herself in rags
and went out like a peddler to trap Snow white.
(SP 151)

Sexton is aware of the important intricacies of punctuation in the use of languages. She notices that the prickliest part of the poem at the time of composition is punctuation, since, as she believes, it can change the meaning of the poem. In her interview with Barbara Kevles, she says:

The punctuation, sometimes the punctuating can change the whole meaning, and my life is full of little dots and dashes. Therefore, I have to let the editors help me punctuate.³⁰

In brief, Anne Sexton through her confessional poetry brings a revolution in the poetic world in which she not only introduces a new conception of poetry with new themes but also devises new poetic conventions knocking out the psychological and technical devices of the old poetry especially of the Modernist poetry. In order to ensure the free flow of her new poetic sensibility, incorporating the autobiography her self or rather buried self, she goes on to carve out open forms and unorthodox techniques.

Sexton conceives of poetry as an axe which cuts the frozen sea within the buried self and brings out the real truth. She frequently defines poetry as a lie and

the poet as a liar, but this lie is to reveal the essential truth. Likewise the poet is a liar but his or her lies are meant to reveal the naked truth. However, for sharpening the poetic axe, the poet has to develop relevant forms and techniques and to carve out a poetic diction which can provide a cutting edge to the confessional poems.

As for form, Sexton takes her own time in discarding tight forms of the old poetry. In many poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All My Pretty Ones, she continues with strict forms, traditional structure, and traditional rhymes. This tendency is visible in such important poems as "Kind Sir: These Woods" and "The Double Image." But even in these poems she adopts a new poetic process of expansion and pruning, of introducing freer forms, new metaphoric language and new imagistic patterns. However, it is in the poems of Live or Die that Sexton comes into her own and shapes a number of forms of free verse. This tendency surfaces in such poems as "Flee on Your Donkey" and "Cripples and Other Stories." Sexton continues her experiments with free forms in her later volumes as well.

To sum up, Sexton regards poetry as a trick or rather tricky game in which the poet employs tricks to deceive readers. These tricks are the old tricks of form and structure as well as of tools and diction. Sexton takes full delight while playing her poetic game of persistent expansion of the themes and their details and constant cutting of the unwanted and irrelevant material and words and phrases. Although her poetry is ostensibly an unrestrained emotional outburst, it is not without poetic checks and balances. The emotional burst is channelled in a well

defined and purposeful direction with the help of structural and formal patterns and linguistic devices. Sexton habitually updates old and orthodox structure and forms. In addition she goes on to make a deft use of verbal techniques of metonymy to express emotional truth. One of the most remarkable specimens of metonymy comes in "The Operation" (All My Pretty Ones).

Sexton also excels in the use of metaphorical devices in structuring poems or in giving the central idea of the poems. Metaphor and imagery are two of the most defining principles of her lyricism. Poems like "Some Foreign Letters" and "The Double Image," (To Bedlam and Part Way Back). "The Break" (Love Poems), "Dreaming the Breasts" (The Book of Folly), and "The Rowing Endeth" (The Awful Rowing towards God). Apart from metaphors, Sexton also excels in the use of imagery. We find a rich variety of images in her poetry. These images are not only crystal but also sharp enough to produce a storm in the brain of the readers. The images, Sexton uses in "All My Pretty Ones," "The Starry Night," and "Lament" (All My Pretty Ones) continue to haunt the mind of the reader for a long time. However, the most remarkable form of imagery appears in "Live" (Live or Die) in which images become instrumental in reviving and reinforcing poet's will to live.

Furthermore, Sexton reinforces her confessional poetry with metonymy, metaphor, and imagery as well as with the orthodox tools of irony and understatement. As we find in "The Addict," (Live or Die) she shapes irony as self-mockery for distancing her poetic self from her real self to escape self-absorption. Likewise she uses understatements to hold back truth in order to

reveal emotional truth behind literal facts. She also writes disguised poem to mitigate her personal suffering. In so far as the language is concerned, Sexton's intention is to use open language for expressing open emotions. By open language, she meant simple and direct language for complicated mental states. She does not hesitate to adopt colloquial language for expressing truth buried in the depths of human psyche. In short Sexton, even though therapeutic poet is a conscious artist who knows and uses the tricks of her trade.

Chapter 3 – Notes

¹J.D. McClatchy, *Anne Sexton: Somehow To Endure*, "Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 251: hereafter the article cited as *Somehow to Endure* and the book as McClatchy.

²Stephen Stepanchev, *A Critical Survey* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965) 5: hereafter cited as Stepanchev.

³Sexton, interview with Barbara Kevles, "The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton," *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, J.D. McClatchy, 28.

⁴Sexton, interview "With Gregory Fitz Gerald," *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1985) 183: hereafter the interview cited as Gerald and the book as *No Evil Star*.

⁵Sexton, Gerald, *No Evil Star* 183.

⁶Sexton, interview with Anne Sexton; Patricia Marx: *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 40: hereafter the interview cited as Marx and the book as McClatchy.

⁷Sexton, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," William Packard, McClatchy, 45: hereafter cited as Packard.

⁸Polly C. Williams, "Sexton in the Classroom," McClatchy 98.

⁹Sexton, Packard, McClatchy 45.

¹⁰Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 33.

¹¹Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 33.

¹²Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 34.

¹³Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 35.

¹⁴Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 33.

¹⁵Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979) 61: hereafter cited as Self-Portrait.

¹⁶Gerald 182.

¹⁷May Swenson, "On All My Pretty Ones," rev., McClatchy 124: hereafter cited as Swenson.

¹⁸Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 53: hereafter cited as Hall.

¹⁹Sexton, Selected Poems of Anne Sexton edited with an Introduction, Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988) 52: hereafter the book cited as SP and the introduction as Introduction.

²⁰Hall 38.

²¹Ben Howard, "On The Awful Rowing towards God," rev. McClatchy 182: hereafter cited as Howard.

²²Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 85: hereafter cited as Phillips.

²³Howard 182.

²⁴Polly C. Williams, "Sexton in the Classroom," McClatchy 98: hereafter cited as Williams.

²⁵Howard 182.

²⁶Hall 48.

²⁷Robert Boyers, "Live or Die: The Achievement of Anne Sexton," McClatchy 214: hereafter cited as Boyers.

²⁸Boyers 214.

²⁹Boyers 215.

³⁰Kevles 20.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

Kamala Das is one of the most powerful poetic voices of the twentieth century literary realm. She has been described as "a unique literary phenomenon."¹ Das is unique in the sense that her life and literature raise controversies that surprise and shock our social consciousness to an unprecedented level. Her literature is surprising for she opts for new subjects and writes in a way only she can do. It is shocking because she attacks age-old beliefs, customs, and conventions and goes on to make disclosures of the mysteries of the female body and its convulsions, that cause embarrassment to the pilots of our society. Furthermore, she is also unique for the choice of a mode for her poetic utterances that are beset with psychological and social perils of the greatest magnitude. However, it is this very uniqueness which makes her a multi-faceted poet par excellence.

The multi-faceted character of Das's personality makes her poetry a pattern of variegated threads of feminine mystique, romantic longing, expressionism, loneliness, vacant ecstasy, mental landscape, spiritual and religious quest, existential needs, biological convulsions, etc. But the thread which is most conspicuous, and which actually displays the colours all other threads in itself is the confessional thread. It not only determines the character and quality of her work but also secures her place among the modern poets of the world, placing her

"somewhere near Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Judith Wright among women poets and Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, and John Berryman among men poets."²

Since confessional poetry is by and large the autobiography of the poet, it derives its themes as well as its meaning and substance from his or her life. As this observation is applicable to the poetic career of Kamala Das as well, "it is imperative that her life and poetry should be studied together."³ Devindra Kohli believes that her poetry is rooted in her life especially in her failure in love. "The failure of love," Kohli writes, "and the birth of poetry seem to be significantly related to each other in Kamala Das."⁴ Her poetic career ran parallel to her life. Kohli sums up her life in an eloquent phrase from her poem "The Fear of the Year," "virgin whiteness." Interpreted in terms of life, the phrase connotes impulses and reactions to different situations of life. But interpreted in terms of poetry it means the poetic sensibility of lust or to be precise the burning heat of lust. Indeed in her life and literature, Das became a champion of the body consciousness.

Interestingly Das's life was not much different from the lives of other confessional poets. It was the life of misery and struggle, a life lived on a plane that was conducive to the confessional poetry in which the poet wants to show her humiliations, bruises, and wounds suffered in the struggle. Her experience becomes all the more fascinating, since it is the experience of a woman who has waged a relentless campaign against the male dominance. The story of Kamala's struggles and suffering is embodied in her poetry as well as in her autobiography

My Story. Although written in confessional mode, the facts of her personal life can be accepted only with some reservations in view of her liking for contrivations and literary manipulations.

The image of Kamala Das, as unfolded alike in her life and work is the image of a woman of irrepressible personality caught in the whirlpool of irresolution, restlessness, anxiety of insecurity, and racial legacies. Throughout her life Das could not resolve between the twin instincts of love and lust. Besides the complex problem of female ambivalence which she explored in her poetry produced in her, to use Devindra Kohli's phrase "temperamental restlessness."⁵ Throughout her life she hankered after an emotional, and domestic security. Moreover, she felt the tensions caused by her Nalapat and Nayar heritage. The Nalapat conception of chastity and the matrilinear tradition of Nayars were always heavy upon her mind. She wrote in one of her articles:

I plead for the return of a social order that allowed a woman to have more than one husband if she so desired. Things change or end. But the blood is an eternal river, and in my veins flows the robust blood of my ancestress who married two or more men and were happy.⁶

A rebel by nature Kamala Das assumed the role of an iconoclast, revolutionary, and innovative confessional poet at one and the same time. She turned rebellious against the social norms for a girl. She began to wear shirts and trousers of her brother, cut her hair and ignored the fetters of her womanliness. She became determined to break the traditional images of man and woman and to demolish the walls of pretensions and hollowness of social institutions. However, there is another view of Das's life, according to which she "has never flouted the

values of oriental culture.”⁷ Iqbal Kaur subscribes to this view, as she feels that the works of Das have created a wrong image of the writer in the mind of readers. Kamala Das in her real life is quite different from the poet Kamala Das. In poetry she is a female voice representing her race. Kaur states that “she has actually been voicing not only her own despairs and frustrations but those of every women who is victim of the male governed world and it not allowed to think that any definitions of herself, apart from the ones, men have given her, are possible.”⁸

Obviously Kamala Das, who raises her voice for her race is an iconoclast. She goes on the rampage against the oriental norms, doing things which sometimes defy reason. She was actually the forerunner of a movement which championed the cause of women. Das came forward to voice her concern for women when feminism was in its infancy. Her revolt was against the power imbalance of the society. “She aimed at dismantling the past ruthlessly, to build up a new world based on justice and equality between the two sexes and not on sexual politics – a world in which it was the individual potential of men and women and not their sex that would determine their possibilities – a world in which the fields possible to men are possible to women too. Hence, the clash between her and her society was inevitable.”⁹

As Kamala Das aspired for “a new life, an unstained future” for the women of her generation, she became impatient at the complacency and moralizing of the people. “I am tired of my generation,” she says, “I don’t like them one bit, all their moralising all their pretences. I can’t stand any more of the lies they tell, the poses they strike... I don’t understand them. They can never understand me.”¹⁰ Das’s

impatience against her generation and the state of women in Indian society produced in her a sense of violent protest. She found in her poetic heart a simmering volcano, which ultimately exploded in form of an innovative poetry. She spearheaded a type of poetic revolution which aimed at justice. "All the pain unexpressed," she writes, "and the sad tales left untold, made me write recklessly and in protest."¹¹ "I took up writing," she goes on to add, "hoping that would help the volcano within to explode in a slow orderly way."¹² Thus by a slow poetic revolution, she aspired to change the face of Indian society.

Das's feminist but firm voice, of rebellion, iconoclasm, and poetic revolution, was the product of her heredity and environment, especially of her Nayar Tharavad and fast changing Kerala milieu. According to Usha V.T. even though women in Kerala had a superior position, they were not in a position of authority. "Yet the structure gave her security and a certain measure or freedom – of choice and action – not available to women in patriarchal societies all over the world."¹³ Kamala Das was all set to take advantage of this freedom and security and frequently indulged in love games hunting for lovers. But she was not always successful. In an article published in Opinion, she wrote:

I thought once that there would be such men in the world whose harshness would turn out to be skin deep, and hunting out one of them would be an exciting game, for I would then unpeel his soul and taste the sweetness of love. How tragically I collapsed I collapsed at the end of each revelation! Now I am a reformed and wise woman, a typical Nalapat lady, and spend hours cleaning the undersides of my long finger nails and between my toes.¹⁴

It was precisely during this transitional period, when social values and norms were changing fast, Das was born on March 31, 1934 in Punneyurkulam in Southern

Malabar region of Kerala. Interestingly her parents belonged to different communities. While her father was from a Nayar family, her mother was a Nalapat woman. Even though both of them were poets, they possessed different temperaments. Das was thus caught between the crossfire of Tharavad and Nalapat legacies. While Nayar tharavad stood for security of women, Nalapat inculcated a different set of norms of chastity, which most probably influenced Das's outlook on sex and chastity. Iqbal Kaur feels that "she [was] actually an integral part of the Nalapat women's Cult of Chastity."¹⁵ Kamala felt the horror of this arid union which took place, as Devindra Kohli writes, "against the conventions of the time."¹⁶ The husband and wife seldom lived together. While her mother lived in Malabar, her father stayed on at Calcutta. At the age of fifteen Das came to the poignant realization of her divided heritage. It had been clear to her, she wrote in her Story that her home was broken up. With the maiden name of Madhvikutty, Das spent a neglected childhood in a discordant family with her father lost in the business of selling Rolls Royces, Humbers and Bentleys – all imposing cars – to the Indian princes and their relatives and with her mother lying always on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam.

Neither the house in which they lived nor its location was congenial to her. The family had to live on the top floor of the repair-yard of the motor car company, where the father was employed. There was nothing in it to beat the boredom or rather frustration caused by the tension created by the ill-mated parents. The only redeeming feature was the cook, who took care of her and her elder brother Mohandas, serving the meals and carrying them to a European school

a furlong away. However, cook's care was not capable of mitigating her sense of humiliation suffered at the hands of the white school-mates who insulted, jeered, and tortured them for their nut-brown skin. Das ruefully remembered that the dark boys and girls were whisked away to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories, whenever a white dignitary visited the school.

The consciousness of the swarthy skin and ordinary feature always tormented her, producing in her a sense of inferiority complex. As a reaction, it most probably made her run after males in order to prove her femaleness. It is also "related to her gestures aimed at discovering, identifying, and consolidating her sense of belonging."¹⁷ To quote her:

i was born fair but within weeks like the rolled gold bangles on the poor ladies arms my skin grew tarnished i was the first dark girl in the family there was something tainted in me of this i was aware but my mother told my bridegroom be gentle she is the most innocent being you will ever meet.¹⁸

Das became so obsessive with her dark complexion that she returned to it time and again in her poetry through the images of darkness.

But Das was not a girl of defeatist mentality. She was quite innovative and could find ways and means to draw happiness out of her uncongenial circumstances. Subsequently, in collaboration with her brother, Kamala started a manuscript magazine for which she was to write verses which made her cry, while he was to illustrate them. Once when they were on a picnic to the Victoria Gardens, she felt very lonely and slipped out to the old cemetery. Speaking of her mental condition at that time, she observes: "I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living."¹⁹

Das attended many schools in Calcutta as well as in her home state. After attending the European school in Calcutta, she joined the Elementary school at Punneyurkulam and then a boarding school run by the Roman Catholic nuns. But in each of them, she got ill and was removed to Calcutta where private tutors were engaged to teach her fine arts.

Das's parents could not provide the type of emotional security, which she needed to sustain her life of intense longing. She was always painfully conscious of the crushing weight of a broken family. The parents, who had to live separately, could not appreciate the needs and demands of an independently growing personality. Their indifference aroused in her an intense desire for independence. She rebelled against them because they

...considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses.²⁰

Kamala Das was perturbed by not only with the indifference of the parents but also with the feeling that they wanted to get rid of her:

I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed.

(My Story 82)

Years after, in her interview with Iqbal Kaur, Das gave vent to her disappointment when she told her that her marriage was a punishment for not doing well in Mathematics.

He had warned me that if I did not do well in Maths he would marry me off. Unfortunately, I could never do well in Maths and hence I was married off as a punishment.²¹

Das's mother too, as she told Kaur, was not able to provide "the love and security" Das expected from her:

My mother has never been able to give me the love and security that I needed. She has always been indifferent. Even now, she invariably sides with my husband whenever there is a problem.²²

This indifferent rather callous attitude of the parents was responsible for an ambivalence or duality found in her life and work, a duality rooted in her desire for independence and need for security. According to Devindra Kohli, Das could not help "expressing an ambivalence proceeding from her own duality, proceeding from, that is the combination in herself of a need for domestic security and the desire for an - independence, an independence consistent with a non-domestic mode of living."²³

Das's marriage at the immature age of fifteen with a brutish man of thirty was simply suffocating. There was not only a generation gap but also difference of attitude and outlook towards life. If she was a love lorn lady lonely in her dreams, while her husband was brutish in his sex-behaviour. Madhava Das, her husband worked in the Reserve Bank of India at Bombay. He was crude in his dealings and made rude lustful advances to her. He shocked the sensitive girl of fifteen with the shameless descriptions of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar. Without the prologue of love-game, i.e. soft touches of tender, caressing, and sweet words, he would simply insist upon her to bare her breasts and would bruise her body. Resentful of her

marriage, solemnized against her wishes, she could manage to remain a virgin for nearly a fortnight. Later she succumbed and sex became a routine. Describing loveless sex as a daily routine with a man immersed in files, Das writes with a feeling of regret:

My husband was immersed in his office-work, and after work there was the dinner, followed by sex. Where was there any time left for him to want to see the sea or the dark buffaloes of the slopes?²⁴

To her husband's exploits in extra-marital sex, and interest in other women, Das's reaction was the typical reaction of a woman nurtured in Nayar Tharavad which allowed freedom to women to have more than one husband. Subsequently she decided "to be unfaithful to him at least physically" (My Story 1932). She began her sex-odyssey. She eventually described the experiences of her sexual adventures in a number of poems. Aware of the charms of love even before her marriage especially in her infatuation with Govind Kurup, an eight-class boy and with the twenty nine year old art tutor as well as through her lesbian affair with her teacher, she began her life of romance with an unsuccessful affair with a bricklayer and with the kisses of one of her cousins. After the frustrating experience of an incomplete rape by a drunken stranger, she fell in love with an extremely handsome young man, while playing tennis at the Khar gymkhana. Thereafter she came close to her pen-friend Carlo and was passionately kissed by a Spanish who phoned her frequently while she was in Bombay. In Calcutta she became Carlo's Sita. Again in Bombay at church gate she came in contact with a handsome dark man with a tattoo between his eyes. She became involved with an affair with him. It was nothing short of an adultery, as she confessed: "Like the majority of city-

dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while, but I found it distasteful”
(My Story 183).

However, her experience of adultery and sex-experience with other lovers left her high and dry. She came to realize that all men were of the same nature cruel, sex-hungry, and callous. She looked for a man who would transport her to a world of egolessness:

I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man's heart. Otherwise why did I not get my peace in the arms of my husband? Subconsciously I had hoped for the death of my ego. I was looking for an executioner whose axe would cleave my head into two. The one who loved me did not understand why I was restive. You are like a civet cat in a cage, said a friend of mine...

(My Story 171)

Das's extra-marital sexual encounters brought her neither peace nor love but frequent bouts of illness, mental and physical, including manic-depressions, sometimes culminating into attempts to commit suicide. The birth of her first son Monoo left her extremely weak. Anyhow, she continued to endure her husband's infidelity to her. But after the birth of her second son Priyadarsin, her restlessness increased to an alarming level and she was put under the case of a skilled psychiatrist. Meanwhile she suffered an emotional jolt with the sad demise of her grandmother. She ruefully wrote: "None has loved me as deeply as my grandmother" (My Story 1192). Sometime after the illness of her eldest son, Das again fell seriously ill and bled almost to death. But she was brought back to life by a sweet lady doctor. After returning from Calicut where she gave birth to her third son, Jaisurya, she suffered a sudden and serious breakdown of health.

Though tenderly cared after by her friend Shirley, she was reduced to "moulting bird" (*My Story* 179). But she soon recovered like the legendary phoenix. Coming to Bombay, she felt lonely and sickly. After her affair with the dark man, she once again became ill and was admitted to the Bombay Hospital. She went to live in her Nalapat House. But when she suffered a sudden heart attack, she came to Bombay for treatment. Subsequently, she became a permanent heart-patient.

The intermittent mental breakdowns produced in Das suicidal tendencies. Time and again she attempted to take her life. These attempts brought a welcome change in her mentality, making her mentally prepared to accept death as a lover, and when it would come: She told Iqbal Kaur:

I have written several stories in Malayalam all revolving round the concept of death. I wanted to escape from life those day because it was too much to bear the loneliness, utter loneliness. I tried several times to kill myself. I wanted to die, but every time the family doctor would revive me, bring me back to life. Now I don't think about death but now it is like a girl who knows that she is betrothed and very soon there would be the marriage. So, I am a betrothed person. I talk about death or write about it or glorify it. I think of the loss that my death would bring to my poor husband and my mother. I don't want to leave them destitute. These two are my responsibilities. But death at least will be an end. Sometime I wish I should bring some hired killers to kill me.²⁵

The experience of abortive love affairs and the bout of illness, though painful, shocking, and upsetting, were blessings in disguise, since they provided grit to her literary mill, rendering her not only poetic themes but wonderful imagery as well to give vent to her rebellious ideas and deeply felt emotions. There was yet another silver-lining visible during the dark-clouds of illness. Das came closer to her family, especially to her alienated husband. Illness made her

aware of the female nudity, which became central to her poetry. Acknowledging the experience of the naked body she writes:

I have spent a lot of time at hospitals both as an inmate and as a visitor. When I was convalescing, my private nurse used to wheel me past the general wards where the nurses sponged the patients or helped them into the clothes. I have seen corpulent men, pregnant women and the green-hued cancer patients, all naked. I have seen wrinkled bellies and thin backs broken with red bed-sores. Not once have I felt sick looking at any of them. The human body in all conditions fills me with awe and tenderness. I am humble when I look at it.²⁶

The protection and the tenderness shown by the husband, during her illness and nervous breakdown changed Das's attitude towards him. She developed a sort of physical intimacy with him, as she now surrendered herself totally to him in bed. To quote her:

Whenever he tried to strip me of my clothes, my shyness clung to me like a second skin and made my movements graceless. Each pore of my skin became at the moment a seeing eye, an eye that viewed my body with distaste. But during my illness, I shed my shyness and for the first time in my life learned to surrender totally in bed with my pride intact and blazing.

(My Story 112)

Das, in her later life, not only surrendered to her husband but also felt grateful for "the suffering [he] inflicted" upon her. For it was this suffering which spurred her poetic sensibility. She acknowledged this fact in her interview with Iqbal Kaur:

I can't but forgive people who caused me to write poetry. If they hadn't hurt me, I wouldn't have been a poet at all and probably the only thing that really matters to me is my poetry, my writing and the right to live as a poet. So far as my husband is concerned, I am grateful to him for the suffering inflicted on me in my youth, for without them I would not have written poetry at all.²⁷

Even though the life of Kamala Das appears to be an open book, we cannot rule out a habit concealment, keeping something hidden and or deliberately holding back crucial information. Furthermore, one cannot deny the presence of a streak of sentimentalism even sensationalism in her. Many of her actions and reactions were questionable. For instance one can hardly understand or approve of her decision to rebel against her unchartered freedom and seek peace, solace, and security in the orthodoxy and strict control of Islam and too at the age of sixty five. Like Wordsworth she was tired of her limitless freedom. The poet, who fought for the emancipation of women throughout her life, became an orthodox woman, a puritan in her life, virtuous, clean, conservative in thinking, praying daily, and wearing white clothes because she is now a widow. Her rebellion against the religion of her ancestors suggests that her spiritual love to her Ghanshyam was only superfluous and poetic. It questions the truthfulness of her beliefs and sentiments.

The bitter experiences received from her life, whetted Kamala's poetic sensibility inherited from her family. Her mother and father were poets. Das fondly remembered her mother lying always on her belly on her bed, composing poems in her mother-tongue Malayalam. Her grand uncle Narayana Menon was a famous poet-philosopher. Her grandmother's younger sister, Ammalu who also lived with them, was a poet devoted to Lord Krishna and who inspired Kamala to write religious poetry. Though she did not have the benefit of higher education in a university, she still managed to read some poets, especially the confessional poets who inspired her to write a poetry seldom written before in any Indian

language. Early in her childhood, Das read Whitman who left an indelible impression upon her mind. As she told Iqbal Kaur, she also liked the tragic poetry of Sylvia Plath:

I enjoyed reading Sylvia Plath's poetry as well as *The Bell Jar*. I admire Sylvia Plath for her courage to kill herself.²⁸

Das liked Byron and read number of eminent scholars and was in close touch with modern thinkers including Marx and his followers. Among Indians she liked Sanskrit poets especially Kalidas.

The experiences of life, especially the painful ones, became instrumental in awakening Das's poetic sensibility. The intensity of the painful feelings and the instinctive compulsions of telling the truth persuaded her to adopt the confessional mode which was capable of voicing her personal pain resulting from the wounds inflicting upon her from the callous world and its savage rites. She wrote a poetry of virgin whiteness, which as we have explained earlier, expressed her impulsive reactions to life in sensuous rather sensual images of the world around. In her poems, like a typical confessional poet, she performed "anatomy" on herself through a "mental striptease," extruding her autobiography, through peeling off "the layers of her body," and through studying the "trappings" and "snares" of the male body, and the "hungers" of her own lazy skin, which people call love or lust.

Das is adherent of the confessional cult, which makes a clear breast of everything whether mental or physical. But she does it in an artistic manner i.e. with a mixture of fact and faction. She also uses this confessional license to increase the efficacy of her intimate disclosures. Das, according to Prof. S.D.

Sharma, makes "tall, far-reaching and meaningful confessions,"²⁹ of sublime heights. It is of little consequence whether these confessions are fake or genuine. Confessionalism for her is a literary tool which makes her poetry a vehicle of truth, personal as well as impersonal. Explaining the scope of Das's confessionalism Prof. Sharma writes:

Yes, Kamala Das confesses a number of things, exclusively related to her ownself – self as a woman with her strong feminine sensibilities, self as a person with powerful – proclivities and antipathies, caprices and whim whams. She does not feel shy of exhibiting her frailties and virtues as a woman; her superior self as a mother and her inevitable exploitation as a wife; her delicate and precarious position as a daughter and granddaughter; her weakness as an enlightened companion to an enlightened husband and soon and so forth.³⁰

Although Kamala Das did not write poetry to purify her being from obsessive elements, she certainly wrote it to voice her pent-up feelings. Furthermore, she wrote it with a devotional attitude, because "poetry for [her] is very personal and private. It is like prayers. I don't want to share it with the public. I write a lot in my private diary and only a fraction of it has been published."³¹

However, in her prayers incorporated in her private diary, she included even the most private things or taboos i.e. not only her traumatic experiences in love and sex and her attitude towards her husband lovers but also the changes in her female body. Even though her confessions are not made in a clinical fashion, they betray a strong influence of psychoanalysis. She is like all those confessional poets, who "give literary form a new sense of personality, attaching value to the image of man presented by clinical psychology."³² However, like many other confessional, she

provides universal dimensions to her personal pain, humiliations, sufferings, convulsions of her body, paranoia, psychological breakdowns and even looming suicide.

Since Das's poetry is an outburst of her personal experience, it can be legitimately interpreted only in terms of her autobiography. Indeed her autobiography provides us with the mental background in which some of the poems were composed. Nevertheless, for most of the poems one has to rely only upon hints, suggestions, and surmises. It is remarkable to note that all the poems incorporated in her three volumes of poetry, Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973) are confessional in the strict sense of the term. Hence under present circumstances, we are concerned only with poems central to Das's confessional sensibility. Furthermore, in the absence of the dates of composition or a precise chronology we cannot pretend to trace the mental development of a poet who has brought a revolution in Indo-Anglian poetry. Chronological order of composition is relevant for graphing the development of poet's journey from confession to enlightenment or illumination. Unfortunately in Das no facility of this type is available. We have to remain content with the frequent thematic overlappings which are formidable obstacles in the way of forming a precise idea of poet's confessional journey.

Kamala Das's first volume is based on her Calcutta experiences, which included memories of "beautiful sights," dance of the eunuchs, ox-carts "proud heavy-turbaned men," and "tattooed wives." To quote her:

And yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw for the first time the eunuchs' dance. It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute, gaudily painted like a cheap bazaar toy. It was at Calcutta that I saw the ox-carts moving along the Starand Road early in the morning with proud heavy turbaned men, their tattooed wives with fat babies dozing at their breasts like old drunkards in clubs at lonely hours.

(My Story 157)

But at the same time, Calcutta was also a place, where she had the first feel of frustration in love, humiliations, loneliness, and above all the sense of existential insecurity from which she continued to suffer in her life to come. In Calcutta she had an experience of utter dismay. By a strange coincidence in 1963, when she came to the city, she met the man who hurt her when she was fourteen year old and became desperate to get him at any cost. She plunged "long into an undignified ill-fated love-affair, moving about like a sleep-walker to meet him in the hot afternoons at strange places. Perhaps that rude summer crept into every line of poetry I wrote then."³³

The rude summer without the rain of love sets the "tone and temper" of not only of Summer in Calcutta but more or less of entire poetry. This drought of love finds its first expression in "The Dance of the Eunuchs." It makes the poet, "poignantly conscious of the shadowy borderline between fulfilment and unfulfilment."³⁴ Das exemplifies this drought of love through the images "vacant ecstasy," "sexual drought, rottenness," and the aridity of Eunuch's dance or even of their lives:

Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left un-born...

Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
 And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
 Were thin in limbs and dry, like half-burnt logs from
 Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
 Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
 Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed, still;
 All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions.
 The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightening
 And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
 Attics and the urine of lizards and mice.³⁵

"The Freaks" is another poem of sexual humiliation suffered by the poetic persona as a married woman. Even though her man has desire but his desire is nothing more than a puddle. Moreover he has only "skin's lazy hungers," without genuine passion of love. Man's sexual passivity and slackness makes her female persona impatient and frustrated, as the moment of passivity seems to mock her feminine integrity. However, she is not prepared to remain passive. She decides to "flaunt" a grand, flamboyant lust:

He talks, turning a sun-stained cheek to me,
 his mouth a dark cavern where stalactites
 of uneven teeth gleam, his right hand on
 my knee while our minds, willed to race towards
 love, only wander, tripping idly over
 puddles of desire... Can this man with
 nimble fingertips unleash nothing more
 alive than the skin's lazy hungers?
 Who can help us who have live so long and
 have failed in love? The heart, an empty cistern
 waiting through long hours, fills in self
 with coiling snakes of silena... I am
 a freak. It is only to save my face
 I flauant at times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

(BKD 42)

Like the poetry of the American confessional poets, Das's poetry is replete with body consciousness. In "A Relationship," incorporated in The Old Playhouse

and Other Poems, she defines even spiritual things like love in terms of body. For her love is simply "body's wisdom." It is this wisdom which provides meaning to life. Everything else is subservient to it. In the form of desire, it invests her male with beauty. Taking the form of "quiet touch," of the blind kindness, it produces an experience that nobody can betray. Even words cannot destroy it. "The betrayal with words," writes Devindra Kohli, "does not matter so long as the body whispers wisdom and so long as the poet and her man can 'communicate' this wisdom to each other."³⁶ To quote from the poem:

This love older than I by myriad
Saddened centuries was one a prayer
In his bones that made them grow in years of
Adolescence to this favoured height. Yes,
I was my desire that made him male
And beautiful, so that when at last, we met
To believe that once I knew not his
From, his quiet touch, or the blind kindness
Of his lips was hard indeed. Betray me?
Yes, he can, but never physically
Only with words that curl their limbs at
Touch of air and die with metallic sights.
Why care I for their quick sterile sting while
My body's wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my steep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayer's arms...³⁷

Besides the themes of frustration, humiliation, body consciousness, and sex, other themes like alienation, nostalgia, despair, and mental illness, central to confessional poetry, also find expression in the poems of this volume. The sense of alienation is rooted in existential insecurity. Though Das eulogises body and the pleasures it offers, she soon realizes that loyalty to the body is "no guarantee against the sense of alienation and emotional unfulfilment."³⁸ This realization is

exemplified in "The Fear of the Year." Other poems like "My Grandmother's House," "The Wild Bougainvillea," "The End of Spring" etc. bring out poet's gloomy despair. In "My Grandmother's House," the poet is overwhelmed by memories. While in "The End of Spring" she is fearful of decay.

In "My Grandmother's House," Das digs her family skeleton to highlight her personal history. However, for her the grandmother, like Sexton's grandmother, is a source of strength. Her house is a place of enlightenment and each time she visits the house, she returns elevated and wiser. Nevertheless, she remains painfully aware of her aberration and the mental suffering caused by it.

.....you cannot believe, darling,
can you, that I lived in such a house and
was proud and loved, I who have lost
my way and beg now at stranger's doors
to receive love, at least in small change?

(BKD 21)

Like Sexton, Das is hard upon her parents, holding them responsible for her miserable life. But she reserves her worst anger for her lovers and husband who were responsible for so many agonizing moments in her life. In "The Sunshine Cat," she tells her about her mental illness in the company of a cruel husband who takes her to the brink of death. The tormenting experiences of life produces in her a sense of emptiness or drought inside her being. No wonder in "Too early the Autumn Sights" she is overtaken by "a mood of premature desiccation within."³⁹

The sense of drought within her finds one of its best expressions in "Visitors to the City" which is based on poet's experience of a picnic at Victoria

Gardens as a student. This drought is symptomatic of "her withdrawal into herself, and her sense of inner void."⁴⁰ "Summer in Calcutta" and "My Morning Tree" also speak of the varying moods of the poet. However, the poem most remarkable for its confessional quality is "The Testing of the Sirens" which portrays loneliness or, to be precise, physical loneliness:

and my limbs
warm from love, were once again so lonely.

(BKD 58)

The poem deals with the experience of the poet with a man of pock-marked face. While she goes through a drive with him, she is overwhelmed by a burning sensation of longing which remains unfulfilled.

Das's longing, though rootless and detached, is based on an actual experience of the poet just after the settlement of her marriage. A family-friend arrived with her little daughter and eighteen year old son to stay with her family for a month. There grew a kind of intimacy between the poet and the boy who began to take her out to Victoria Memorial, photographing her and entertaining her with Hindi-film songs. The poet was swept off her feet. Catching alive those moments in her autobiography, she writes:

I felt beautiful when he was with me, arranging my limbs shyly with a blush pinkening his cheeks. He was stocky and fair-skinned. He had taken part in revolutionary activities and was a student-leader. What you are planning to be, I asked him. I shall graduate and then get out of the damn country, he said. He was unhappy at home. He found in me a kindred soul. You are getting married, he said one day: I wonder why you are in such a hurry. I want to escape too, I said. He nodded. We sat for hours on the grass chewing the wheat grass and sharing a silence that was as gentle as the winter's sun.

(My Story 85-86)

In the romantic company of the youthful boy the poet felt, the sirens of love going inside her. When her companion asked about the man she loved, her reaction was peculiarly detached:

I smiled
A smile is such a detached thing. I wear
it like a flower.

(BKD 59)

But underneath this detachment there was a fire of passion burning her entire being

I
shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was
no more night, no more love, or peace, only
the white, white sun burning, burning, burning....
Ah, why does love come to me like pain
again and again and again?

(BKD 59)

A number of Das's poems especially "The Flag," "Someone Else's Song," "Forest Fire," "An Introduction," and "The Wild Bougainvillea," according to Devindra Kohli, "portray a larger panorama of experience transcending her personal moods and feelings."⁴¹ These poems underscore the transcendental undertones of the confessional element. Of all the poems, "An Introduction" is perhaps, one of the most confessional poems in Das's poetry. Complete in itself, the poem embodies all characteristic qualities of confessionalism, viz. search for a relevant confessional mode, personal metaphor, personal humiliations, physical and mental wounds and bruises and above all transcendence which transforms a personal and private experience into something genuinely universal. Moved by a strong impulse to confess and communicate, first she aspires to seek a suitable form of confessional expression. Thereafter she goes on to portray a sensibility, which is

widely awakened. With her doors of perception open, and the faculty of knowledge active and enlightened, she relates her history of life, not in the elemental language, but in the personal language of her mind voicing her personal longings and hopes:

The language I speak becomes
mine, its distortions, its queerness all mine, mine, alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps but it's
honest, it is as human as I am human, you know...
It voices my longings, my hopes and is useful to me
as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions,
it is human speech and hears and is aware Not the deaf,
there, blind speech to trees in storm or of monsoon
clouds or of rain or, of the incoherent muttering of
Of the blazing
funeral pyre.

(BKD 12)

The poet now goes on to tell her personal humiliations, physical as well as mental, suffered as a woman and as a wife in the orthodox traditional set up:

I was a child and later they said, I grew,
for I become tall, my limbs swelled and one or two places
sprouted hair. When I asked for love, not knowing what
else to ask for, he drew a youth of sixteen into his
bedroom and shut the door. He did not beat me but
my sad woman-body felt so beaten. The weight of
my breasts and womb crushed me.

(BKD 12)

Reacting to the crushing weight of her physicality, she rebels against the restrictions imposed by feminine form:

I shrank pitifully. Then I wore a shirt
and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of
this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife.

(BKD 12)

But her family did not tolerate her new stance as her parents and relatives vociferously ask her to assume the role of a traditional woman.

Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife.
they cried. Be embroider, cook or a quarreller
with servants. Fit in, belong, said the categorizers
Be Amy or be Kamala, Or, better still, be just
Madhavikutty. It is time to choose a name, a role.

(BKD 12-13)

Das goes on to tell that society does not like "pretending games":

Don't play pretending games. Don't play at schizophrenia
or be a nympho.

(BKD 13)

In a master stroke Das equates her personal and private experience with the human, natural, and cosmic experience. Her confessional poetry becomes the vehicle of the experience of transcendence which is the ultimate goal of confessionalism:

I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man who wants his
woman, Just as I am every women who seek love.
In him the hungry haste of rivers in me the ocean's
tireless waiting. Who are you, I ask each and all. The answer is, it's I
Anywhere and everywhere I see him who calls himself
In this world he is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath.
It is I who drink a lonely drink near midnight at hotels
of strange towns, it is I who make love and then feel shame,
it is I who lie dying with a rattle in my throat,
I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am both the lover
and the beloved. I have no joys which are not yours
no aches which are not yours
we share the same name, the same fate, the same crumbled dreams...

(BKD 13)

These lines exemplify Das's sense of isolation which, "instead of being internalized, surfaces and becomes part of a woman's experience in its macrocosmic implication in the concluding lines of the poem."⁴² Thus viewed as a whole the poems of Summer in Calcutta incorporate all the rudiments of confessional poetry.

In the next volume, Descendants (1965), Das's confessional tone becomes louder. As her mood of disappointment and frustration deepens her confessionalism assumes greater dimensions. The poems of Descendants capture Das in a precarious state of mind wavering between the death-wish and the wish to live. They remind us Anne Sexton's poems in Live or Die which poetize her struggle to overcome these equally strong human wishes. Interestingly, Das uses one and the same symbol to portray the intimations of life and foot-falls of death. In this volume Das begins her poetic journey after hearing the foot-falls of death.

The poet, in the initial stages, finds herself in a peculiar state of mind, intending to commit suicide. Mina Surjit Singh gives a graphic description of the poet's mind, as she writes:

The beginning of the volume finds the poet at the edge of the sea, contemplating suicide in order to free herself from a life of physical emptiness. The volume beginning on a note of despondency takes us through a meandering journey of passionate, lusty interludes and attendant betrayals, and ends on a note of tired resignation in the absence of spiritual resurrection. The mood at the end, however, is not hysterical but a finely controlled movement from the initial restless desire for oblivion to an acceptance of life's vagaries despite a cribbed and confined spirit.⁴³

Most of the poems of the volume deal with Das's disappointments of her post-marital love and the problems of growing up. Her disappointments are rooted

in her tormenting awareness of the circumstances of her marriage when she was "bundled unceremoniously into wedlock without either being aware, or capable of comprehending the physical and emotional implications of her changed status."⁴⁴ From the very outset it confronts the theme of death-wish which is most central to confessional poetry. The most eloquent expression of Das's death-wish comes in "Suicide" which reminds us of Sexton's mental struggles in Live or Die. According to Bruce King the source of Das's death-wish is her consciousness of the dualism of the body and the soul, a dualism that can be overcome only through death. "The dualism is rooted in her frustrating experience of innocence through sexuality and through the callousness of an uncaring husband."⁴⁵

Das's life after her marriage becomes miserable, for she cannot attune herself to the natural rhythms of sex which establishes, according to D.H. Lawrence, the balance of male and female elements in the universe. "[I]n Das's poetry these natural rhythms seem to have gone awry."⁴⁶ Now she runs after "an ideal sexual union in which distinctions between male and female ceases to control."⁴⁷ But her love remains unrequited and her desire for an unquestioning love too remains unfulfilled. Her lovers fail to realize her "soul's lonely hungers." Subsequently her desire is swallowed by the "vortex of the sea":

I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.

(BKD 27)

"The 'Vortex of the sea,'" writes M.S. Singh, "thus, becomes a multivalent symbol defining a situation, a way of life, pursuit that engulfs irresistibly and

remorselessly, enervating and self-consuming. The sea itself, of creation, destruction, hope, despair, passion, inertia, comes to symbolise, the poet's desire to discover "the bone's supreme indifference."⁴⁸

Das's death-wish is irresistible like that of Sylvia Plath and Sexton. Twice she has attempted to commit suicide but without success. Her wish, though rooted in her dualism, is reinforced by her painful consciousness of marriage that has failed. She expresses this failure with a considerable amount of pain:

I must pose
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.
I must keep the right distance,
Between me and the low.
And I must keep the right distance.
Between me and the high.

(BKD 28)

Overcoming her death-wish Das now goes "from one substitute to another through a tiresome journey of procrastinating relationships in search of true love."⁴⁹ She is again lured by love but this course too leads her to a death-trap, a metaphorical death. With an unending process of acceptance and rejection, love proves only a "swivel-door":

I lost count, for always in my arms
Was substitute for a substitute.⁵⁰

This love-chase brings no comfort to her. She remains high and dry. With every experience her sense of loneliness, betrayal, and guilt increases. She becomes the captive of her own world. She is persistently tormented with a sense of acute guilt which "like the perennial fish-bone can neither be swallowed nor

thrown up."⁵¹ All the substitutes contemplated by the poet fail her. She comes to hate even promiscuity. "The substitute," writes M.S. Singh, "thus assumes the function of a leitmotif, quintessentially reflective of the lost woman's search for spiritual consummation as well as a longing to recover a lost state of childhood innocence symbolised by life with her grandmother in their ancestral."⁵²

Das's consciousness of her guilt is reinforced by her awareness of going too far i.e. by stepping beyond "the sacrosanct precincts of matrimony to pursue a compelling drive for fulfilment in forbidden territory."⁵³ Besides, it Das's poetry also possesses the confessional elements of procrastinations and incarcerations but without the urgency and immediacy that we find in the psychological probing of Lowell, Roethke, Plath, and Sexton. "The manic-depressive states, the centrifugal spin towards madness, the increasing propensity towards suicide, the precarious balancing on the razor's edge, the gritty determination to pull through, the dangerously depressive and uncontrollably euphoric states that lend strength, credibility and intensity to their poetry are conspicuously absent in Das's poetry."⁵⁴

However, Das seldom seems to benefit from her experiences. She does not become wiser, since she continues to burn into the hellfire of "vast/sexual hungers" (BKD 79). As we see in "Composition," its intensity is reinforced by the liberal attitude of her husband who allows maximum freedom to her. But being adolescent and impetuous, she misuses her freedom:

Freedom became my dancing shoe,
how well I danced,
and danced without rest,

until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
and I began to have doubts.

(BKD 78)

A sense of doubt compels her to tell everything to her husband, especially about the various forms of sex that she has tried to satisfy her carnal desires. These forms included premarital, extramarital, nymphomaniac, and lesbian kinds of love-making. She remains busy in her sex-pursuits without any sense of shame or guilt.

I asked my husband,
am I hetero
am I lesbian
or am I just plain frigid?
He only laughed.
For such questions
probably there are no answers
or else
the answers must emerge
from within.

(BKD 78)

However, sexual freedom, as Prof. P.K. Pandeya believes is a "mirage that is never reached." In other words a nymphomaniac woman always lives "[a]tormented existence in pursuit of a fleeting oasis of pleasure that is never reached."⁵⁵ Naturally Das's love-exploits end in fiasco, as her sexual exploits do not provide solace to her restless soul. Subsequently, she becomes tired of her uncharted freedom and begins to feel the weight of guilt upon her mind. In order to unburden herself, she becomes prepared to lay bare her secret self, peeling off its layers:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
autobiography.
The only secrets I always
withhold

are that I am so alone
and that I miss my grandmother.
Reader,
you may say,
now here is a girl with vast
sexual hungers,
A bitch after my own heart.

(BKD 79)

The poet knows that by opening her mind and making frank confessions, she can know the truth embodied in her self:

I also know that by confessing,
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and
to the bone's
supreme indifference.

(BKD 81)

Convinced of the destructive quality of love Das now begins to image it as a-self-destructive agent. Subsequently, in "Ferns," she "arrests sexual love in an image of self-devouring and self-mocking intensity which suggests that perhaps there is a sense in which her glorification of physical love carries with it an element of disenchantment."⁵⁶ Ultimately in "The Invitation, Das comes to realize that love is another kind of death, of course not a literal death but a metaphorical death. In "The Invitation" the sea offers one kind of death, her lover whom she cannot disobey offers another, metaphorical death.

However, "The Invitation" is not so much an invitation to death, no matter metaphorical, but an invitation to live. The poet rejects the way of the sea and accepts the way of life which love or sex offers. The poem, according to Kholi, "rejects the impulse to die and transforms the destructive sea image into a

metaphor of positive joy."⁵⁷ After her painful experiences of sexual love and its empty promises to provide happiness, she comes to realize that "love's fulfilment lies in containment and not in emptiness."⁵⁸ the true happiness for a woman lies in motherhood, which displays the glory of creation. Childbirth announces the fulfilment of love. At the time of the birth of his child, a woman forgets her personal pain and becomes ready to receive the rainfall from above. "She feels and becomes the earth, and finds meaning and fulfilment in love which is not an 'empty container' but is filled with a child."⁵⁹ In "Jaisurya" she writes:

and then the first tinge
of blood seemed
like another dawn breaking.
For a while I too was earth.
In me the seed was silent,
waiting as baby does,
for the womb's quiet expulsion.
Love is not important that
makes the blood carouse
nor the man who brands you
with his lust but is
shed as slough at end of
each embrace.

(BKD 63)

She continues to announce her new credo, the credo of creation, life, and light, against the credo of lust and death and destruction:

Only that matters which forms
as toadstools do
under lightning and rain,
the soft stir in womb,
the foetus growing,
for, only the treasures matter
that were washed ashore
not the long, blue tides that washed them in.

(BKD 63)

Visualizing "another dawn breaking," and feeling "the soft stir in womb," and seeing her son Jaisurya "separated from a darkness," of the womb, the poet recovers her faith in life. The dark night of her soul seems to be over. The triumph of life celebrated in "Captive" and "Jaisurya" is extended to other poems like "The White Flowers." Ultimately the wish to die is replaced by the wish to live, to produce the wisdom of humility. This new philosophy finds its best expression in the title poem "The Descendants." "The sense of death," writes Kohli, "which seems to dominate the collection generates in 'The Descendants' an authentic humility before the unredeemed fate of man. Life is seen as a slow yielding to the 'cold loveliness' of death which is too perfect to be disturbed by the memory of 'insubstantial love' or of being hurled in love. The assaults of time, like the slow assaults of love, yield to the slow facility of decay and death."⁶⁰

We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
exchanging some insubstantial love and
often thought we were hurt, but no pain in
us could remain, no bruise could scar or
even slightly mar our cold loveliness.

We were the yielders,
yielding ourselves to everything. It is
not for us to scrape the walls of wombs for
memories, not for us even to
question death, but as child to mother's arms
we shall give ourselves to the fire or to
the hungry earth to be slowly eaten,
devoured. None will step off his cross
or show his wounds to us, no God lost in
silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
claim us, no, we are not going to be
ever redeemed or made new.

(BKD 43)

Das's will to live is also reinforced by her Krishna-Radha consciousness. "The Radha-Krishna syndrome," writes Dr. A.N. Dwivedi, "is continually associated with the progress of the poet and is witnessed in all her poetical collections."⁶¹ In the first book, Summer in Calcutta, it appears in the poem titled "Radha-Krishna," where the poet, fed up with the physical and carnal love, seeks the security of the spiritual love of Radha for Krishna. In "Radha" (The Descendants) she has an experience of union, as she finds her virgin being dissolving in Krishna:

The Long waiting
 Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
 And the reasoning
 So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
 And virgin crying
 Everything in me
 Is melting, even the hardness at the core
 O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
 Nothing remains but
 You.

(BKD 25)

But elsewhere, especially in "Maggots," she does not feel the bliss of the spiritual union but of death in the arms of Krishna or her husband. In Das's confessional poems Radha represents the whole female world much as Krishna represents the male world. In the words of Mina Surjeet Singh, Das's poetry "gives a remarkably controlled account of her secret desire as well as frustrations. She is herself priest and confessor, sinner, and saint beloved and betrayed. The substitute is every man in his lust and the victim is every 'old wife turned whorish,' struggling to withdraw from under him."⁶² In this way in The Descendants, Kamala Das achieves an important landmark of the confessional art.

Finally in her third collection The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Das gives us a quintessence of her confessional creed. In the fourteen poems reprinted from Summer in Calcutta, she reminds us her body's wisdom as well as hungers, her humiliations, emotional unfulfilments, alienation, nostalgia, family skeletons, cruelties of husband and lovers etc. as well as the achievement of momentary transcendence. In the six poems, taken from The Descendants, she relives her internal drama of agonizing guilt, her tormenting consciousness of going too far, and her intense struggle to overcome her terrible death instinct and goes onto attain the wisdom of humility. In the poems of The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, she returns to her old wounds and renews her search for security from a new angle i.e. from the existential point of view.

In the title poem The Old Playhouse, Das is again obsessed with the sickening state of her mind, with her female self contracting under the weight of the male dominance. She feels that it is gradually choked, blocked, and wounded. With the central metaphor of a dilapidated house, she projects the decay and decomposition of her own self under the stinking company of male companions especially that of her own husband:

You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse 1)

As the summer of life draws near, Das feels that she is reduced to an old and dark playhouse. She becomes aware of the destructive quality of love, she longs for the kind protection of night:

There is

No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal.
For, love is Nareissus at the water's edge haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

(The Old Playhouse 1-2)

In "Gino," she expresses her disenchantment with another form of destructive love-extramarital love. The lovers also possess the blood-hound quality of the husband, as their love is an instrument of physical decomposition. The poem opens with an awareness of death lurking in an illicit love affair. She realizes that decay is a greater reality than love. With the passage of time the body grows uncommonly and gross. Under the "cumulative burden of domesticity, routine, sickness and the final conclusion of death."⁶³ Love becomes a mere convulsion of the body.

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must
Roll across the road. I shall be the patient
On the hospital bed, lying in drugged slumber
And dreaming of home. I shall be the grandmother
Willing away her belongings, those scraps and trinkets
More lasting than her bones. Perhaps some womb in that
Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent.

(The Old Playhouse 14)

The strain of the fragility of love experience and sexual neuroticism also runs through "Glass." According to Shyam Asnani, "Glass," "which suggests in mock indifference the poet's ritual manipulation of various lovers, concludes in bare, austere, clinical lines, stunning the reader with her flamboyant fantasies of sexual neuroticism."⁶⁴

I do not bother
To tell: I've misplaced a father
Somewhere, and I look
For him now everywhere

(The Old Playhouse 21-22)

In the poem, according to Devindra Kohli, "the poet's restlessness is voiced through a Freudian search for the misplaced father-figure."⁶⁵ As a search for the lost father, Glass is related to such poems as "Vrindavan," "Radha-Krishna" and "Lines Addressed to a Devadasi." But it is different from them in the sense that it is "a clinical version of an attempt 'to look for him (the 'misplaced' father) now everywhere.'"⁶⁵

After reliving the old experiences of humiliations and agonizing guilt, Das goes on to solve the survival mystery in "After the Illness." After a long struggle Das ultimately achieves a sense of security in love. Throughout her long career, Das has been tormented by an ontological insecurity, which takes two forms "engulfment" and "petrification." According to Niranjan Mohanti, Das's ontologically insecure self suffered from "petrification" which refers to someone's "fear of being put to use, made object by others."⁶⁷ She also aspires for "engulfment," which refers to the loss of identity in the other. But, as Mohanti

adds, "it occurs to her only in the height of imagination where in she surrenders herself at the altar of Lord Krishna – the ideal, the immortal lover."⁶⁸

The poet extends this theme in "Ghanashyam" included Tonight This Savage Rite. She thinks that spiritual love cannot be provided by a husband because he would turn his back as soon as his lust is quietened. The total merger, which she seeks, can be possible only with a mythical lover like Krishna. Naturally she becomes enamoured of Krishna:

Ghanashyam
You have like a Koel built your
nest in the arbour of my heart.
My life, until now a sleeping jungle
Is at last astir with music.⁶⁹

However, these moments are rare. A security felt in the reassurance of lover's love after poet's illness, in which she has lost her comeliness, is no less efficacious. After her recovery from illness the poet feels happy not only for regaining his physical health but also for her lover's love in spite of the fact that in her

There was
Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger, the blood had
Weakened too much to lust, and the skin, without health's
Anointment was numb and unyearning. What lusted then
For him, was it perhaps the deeply hidden soul?

(The Old Playhouse 50)

Kamala Das wants to know the mystery which sustains her lover's love during her illness. She comes to the conclusion that this survival mystery does not lie in the physical love but in spiritual love or in their combination.

In brief, confessionalism is the defining quality of Kamala Das's poetry. It ensures her place among the best exponents of the confessional mode which produced female poets like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Judith Wright. Confessional themes and confessional mode inform most of the poems of Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), and some of the poems included in Tonight This Savage Rite (1979) written in collaboration with Pritish Nandy. Even though her confessionalism finds its best expression in My Story, these books also mark different stages of Das's confessional journey.

Summer in Calcutta is remarkable for the confessional theme of humiliation, misery, disease, decay, frustration, alienation, agonizing guilt, and transcendence. Poems like "The Dance of the Eunuchs," and "The Freaks" are remarkable for the expression of the sexual humiliations suffered by the poet, whereas poems like "A Relationship" are notable for the theme of sex and love or "body's wisdom." Another important poem "My Grandmother's House" embodies some of the "family-skeletons," "The Fear of the Year" deals with the poet's sense of alienation. There is also a sense of transcendence which is one of the major themes of confessionalism. It finds one of its best expressions in "An Introduction."

In The Descendants Das poetizes her struggle to overcome her death-wish. Her struggle reminds us Anne Sexton's struggles embodied in Live or Die. This struggle is exemplified by most of the poems included in her collection. However, it appears in its most eloquent form in "Composition," "Suicide," and the title

poem "The Descendants." In "Composition," the poet seems overwhelmed with a sense of agonizing guilt, produced by the painful consciousness that she has gone too far. In "Suicide," she verbalizes her intense see-saw struggle between the instincts of life and death. It is in the title poem "The Descendants" that the two instincts converge to bring out the virtue of humility. There are other poems like "The Invitation," "Substitute," "Captive," which deal with different aspects of death and love, which are central to confessional poetry.

In the third collection The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, Das provides us with the quintessence of her confessional vision. By including fourteen poems from Summer in Calcutta, she reminds us of her personal sexual humiliations, sufferings, illness, alienation, and resolution of her problems through transcendence. She also includes six poems from The Descendants to highlight her struggle to overcome her agonizing wish to die which is ultimately resolved through the attainment of the virtue of humility. With the addition of some new poems, she re-affirms these elements. These poems include "The Old Playhouse," "Gino," "After Illness," "Glass," etc. In "The Old Playhouse," using the metaphor of mind, Das opens her old wounds. In "Gino," she again speaks of physical decomposition and the poison of the extra-marital relations. In "After Illness," she describes her wounded self and the survival mystery i.e. the survival of the lover's love during her illness, when the body loses its beauty. In "Glass," like Sexton and Plath, she engages herself in the quest for her lost father. Thus, with the recovery of love Das finds an existential security.

In the last volume, Tonight This Savage Rite, Das finds another kind of security – security by merger in her ideal lover Krishna. This undercurrent of spiritual love or Krishna-consciousness which has its beginning in Radha-Krishna (Summer in Calcutta) and its development in “Radha,” “Maggots,” and “prayers to unfamiliar Gods,” finds its culmination in “Ghanashyam,” of Tonight This Savage Rite. However, this type of merger is only imaginary. Thus all the collections of Das are eloquent specimens of her confessionalism.

Chapter 4 – Notes

¹Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco, "Preface," Kamala Das A Critical Spectrum (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001) V: hereafter the Preface cited as the Preface and the book as Mittapalli and Piciucco.

²A.N. Dwivedi, Kamala Das and Her Poetry (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000) X: hereafter cited as Dwivedi.

³Mittapalli and Piciucco V.

⁴Devindra Kohli, Kamala Das (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1975) 36: hereafter cited as Kohli.

⁵Kohli 15.

⁶Kamala Das, "Why Not More Than One Husband?" Eve's Weekly 6 May, 1972, 35: hereafter cited as "More than One Husband."

⁷Iqbal Ahmed, "Reflections on the Mind and Personality of Kamala Das," Perspectives of Kamala Das's Poetry, ed. Iqbal Kaur (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1955) 129: hereafter the article cited as Ahmed and the book as Kaur.

⁸Iqbal Kaur, "Prefatory Note," Kaur X: hereafter cited as Note..

⁹Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur XI.

¹⁰Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur XI.

¹¹Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur VIII.

¹²Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur VIII.

¹³Usha V.T., "Literary Paradigms of Matriliny: Kamala Das's," My Story, Mittapalli and Piciucco 113: hereafter cited as Usha.

¹⁴Kamala Das, "Frigidity and the Sepia-tainted Photograph," Opinion, 27 November, 1973, 30: hereafter cited as "Frigidity."

- ¹⁵Iqbal Kaur, Note, Kaur IX.
- ¹⁶Kohli 35.
- ¹⁷Kohli 31.
- ¹⁸Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 31.
- ¹⁹Kamala Das My Story (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1986) 10: hereafter cited as My Story with paginations.
- ²⁰Kohli 35..
- ²¹Kamala Das, "I Needed to Disturb Society.." interview with Iqbal, Kaur, 161: hereafter cited as Interview.
- ²²Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 161.
- ²³Kohli 27.
- ²⁴Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 36.
- ²⁵Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 166.
- ²⁶Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 50-51
- ²⁷Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 162.
- ²⁸Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 159.
- ²⁹S.D. Sharma, "Kamala Das's Poetry," Kaur 2: hereafter cited as Sharma.
- ³⁰Sharma, Kaur 2.
- ³¹Kamala Das, qtd. Sharma, Kaur 2.
- ³²D.J. Palmer, qtd. Sharma, Kaur 3.
- ³³Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 63.

³⁴Kohli 62.

³⁵Kamala Das, The Best of Kamala Das with an Introduction "The Ideology of Intimacy" by P.P. Raveendran (Kozhikode: Bodhi Publishing House, 1991) 60: hereafter the book cited as BKD with paginations and the Introduction as Raveendran.

³⁶Kohli 65.

³⁷Kamala Das, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd., 1973) 41: hereafter cited as The Old Playhouse with paginations.

³⁸Kohli 68.

³⁹Kohli 69.

⁴⁰Kohli 70.

⁴¹Kohli 80.

⁴²N. Romadevi, "Kamala Das and the Confessional Mode," Mittapalli and Piciucco, 145: hereafter cited as Ramadevi.

⁴³Mina Surjit Singh, "The Confessional Voice of Kamala Das" Kaur, 91-92: hereafter cited as Singh.

⁴⁴Singh, Kaur 95.

⁴⁵See Bhargavi P. Rao, "Kamala Das: Through a Different Lens," Kaur 125.

⁴⁶Singh, Kaur 91.

⁴⁷Singh, Kaur 91.

⁴⁸Singh, Kaur 91.

⁴⁹Singh, Kaur 92.

⁵⁰Kamala Das, The Descendants (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1967) 7: hereafter cited as Descendants.

⁵¹Singh, Kaur 93.

⁵²Singh, Kaur 93.

⁵³Singh, Kaur 94.

⁵⁴Singh, Kaur 95.

⁵⁵Prabhat Kumar Pandeya, "The Pink Pulsating Words: The Woman's Voice in Kamala Das's Poetry," Kaur 36: hereafter cited as Pandeya.

⁵⁶Kohli 91.

⁵⁷Kohli 92.

⁵⁸Kohli 96.

⁵⁹Kohli 97.

⁶⁰Kohli 100.

⁶¹Dwivedi 37.

⁶²Singh, Kaur 97.

⁶³Kohli 110.

⁶⁴Shyam Asnani, "Kamala Das, Judith Wright and Margaret Atwood as Poets of Love: A Comparative Study," Kaur 76: hereafter cited as Asnani.

⁶⁵Kohli 112.

⁶⁶Kohli 112.

⁶⁷Niranjan Mohanti, "A Feminist Perspective on Kamala Das's Poetry," Kaur 57: hereafter cited as Mohanti.

⁶⁸Mohanti, Kaur 57.

⁶⁹Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy, Tonight This Savage Rite (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1979). 18: hereafter cited as Savage Rite, with paginations.

CHAPTER 5

KAMALA DAS'S LITERARY TECHNIQUE

Since the autobiography of a wounded self or a "leaky ego" cannot be rendered in an impersonal and indirect language of the Modernists, the confessional poet has to develop a new language of direct expression and immediacy. Kamala Das had also to find her own voice and to develop new techniques to give vent to her intensely private experiences. Her persistent attempts to find her true confessional form surfaced in her first book Summer in Calcutta with a striking novelty which baffled the students and scholars of poetry. Such a great scholar as Linda Hess, though impressed by Das's "unchallenged and unmistakable" poetic talent visible in some "superb" poems, could not appreciate her studied "carelessness, looseness, use of ellipses and dots, repetitive techniques, etc. which were absolutely necessary for a poet who was treating a new subject. To her, these devices appeared as instruments of poetic imbalances, having disastrous effects on intensity and precision." She wrote:

There are major weaknesses in Mrs. Das's book. These can be characterized as general carelessness in composition, a looseness typified by the alarming number of ellipses, there lazy dots thrown in at the end or middle of a line and seeming to say, 'This matter could be celebrated much further, but I lack either the wit or the energy to do it.' There are frequent repetitions of words and phrases, another quick solution to the problem of filling up a line but one that has disastrous effects on intensity and precision. There are patches of triteness and lapses of balances. Too often the end of a line brings an unnatural break in the diction which seems to have no excuse except the whim of the author.¹

However, in spite of her focus on the so-called technical gaps, she goes on to announce the birth of a genuine poetic talent:

But all these deficiencies cannot finally cloud the fact that a genuine poetic talent is at work here. It lives on every page, in woevenh even thorough most distressingly flawed poems. And in a few superb pieces it stands forth unchallenged and unmistakable.²

Devindra Kohli though quite enthusiastic about Das's "primitive energy" and "emotional directness," defines her poetry as "a sort of compulsion-neurosis," in which "personality is the raw material." In such poetic form, the need for release is so intense that the poet is concerned neither with philosophy nor with form. Naturally, Das's poetry seems to lack an overt form. Nevertheless it has an inner form, which is dictated by the subject itself. Kohli writes:

This conspicuous absence of an overt intellectual or philosophical framework heightens all the more the primitive energy and emotional directness of her work. No doubt, in her there is little of Ezekiel's studious striving after craft manship, or of the breezy comic irony of Ramanujan, or of the conscious lyricism of Lal. On the contrary, there is in her a sure but unconscious adherence to the compulsions of the inner form and to a pattern which is dictated by the weight and direction of her subject matter.³

Kamala Das's first book Summer in Calcutta published as late as 1966 was not the work of an poetic apprentice but of an accomplished artist who has been in touch with poetry since her birth. According to R.K.S. Iyengar, poetry was "in her blood, as it were, both her mother and grandfather being poets in Malayalam."⁴ Das remembered how her mother composed poems, "lying on her belly on a large four-post bed."⁵ She herself began to compose at the age of merely six:

I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. Each poem

of mine made me cry. My brother illustrated the verses and wrote faintly political articles.

(My Story 8)

Incidentally her first poem was published in 1948 by Madame Sophia Wadia in the Indian P.E.N. Thereafter she never looked behind. Das not only inherited poetic talent but worked it to its perfection. She was a conscious artist who made tremendous efforts to develop language and technique to give perfect expression to the cries of her wounded heart. Prof. R.K.S. Iyengar who marks Kamala's haste in her writing, appreciates her "mastery of phrase," and "control over rhythm." He goes on to add that "the words [are] often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm [is] so nervously, almost feverishly alive."⁶

Das's poetry is not at all formless. It cannot be called a structureless enthusiasm, as it possesses well organized patterns to objectify the mood of the emotionally charged poet. For instance, in "The Dance of the Eunuchs," S. Murali finds a "primordial incantatory form" with "broken up syntax, and lines left-half way through" that enhances the "pathos of dance."⁷ Das's instinct for form is also manifested in "My Morning Tree" (Summer in Calcutta) in which the desperate longing of the poet is objectified in a well defined structure. The poet finds its verbal objectification "through the judiciously sustained images of the 'ugly' tree..."⁸ In the poems of The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, according to Kohli, one witnesses "a more sophisticated organisation of materials." There is, he adds, "an ample evidence that Kamala Das has overcome the tendency to occasionally let the structure of the poem run away with the deluge of the precipitating feeling, a tendency which was most glaring in her longer poems: 'Composition' and 'The

Suicide.' 'Blood' which is the only new poem in the longer genre shows an admirable restraint in tone and tautness of line."⁹

As a conscious artist, she always endeavours to develop suitable forms and diction to express her wounded self. She takes recourse to orthodox and unorthodox devices like imagery, analogy, paradox, metonymy, irony, understatement, fusion of fact and fiction, and above all symbolism, transcendence, and verbal music to reveal her private experiences as a woman. In her poetic diction, one of the most remarkable things is her language. Obviously her language, as she admits herself is "half-English, half-Indian." However, this statement is only partially true, since she also absorbs the "distortions" and "queerness" of other languages as well. Evidently her language is the language of her sentient mind with its doors of perception wide open. It is not the language of Nature or its objects:

The language I speak becomes
mine, its distortions, its queernesses all mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps but it's
honest, it is as human as I am human, you know...
It voices my longings, my hopes and is useful to me
as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions,
It is human speech, the speech of the mind that is here, not
a mind that sees and hears and is aware. Not the deaf there
blind speech of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain
or, of the incoherent mutterings of the blazing
funeral pyre.¹⁰

In poetry, Das uses English in an Indian context. But her mastery of the language is unquestionable. As Anisur Rahman suggests, she writes in English with an easy command and awful skill. Dr. A.N. Dwivedi finds her poetic diction "lyrical and natural." "Simplicity and lucidity," he further adds, are its hallmarks.

"It is hardly ever wrapped up in philosophical broodings or mystical abstractions."¹¹ She does not model her style on Eliot or Auden, but goes on to chart her own course. "I have read," she goes on to state, "very little poetry I do not think that I have been influenced by any poet."¹² Even though Kamala's lyricism is innovative, it possesses echoes of the great classics that invests it with an unprecedented charm. To take an instance from "An Introduction":

It is I who lie dying with a rattle in my throat,
I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am both the lover
and the beloved. I have no joys which are not yours
no aches which are not yours
we share the same name, the same fate, the same crumbled dreams...

(BKD 13)

"The last three lines," comments Dr. Dwivedi, "become incantatory and speak in the voice of an enraptured sage of the Upanishads. Here language has been put to an excellent use, and it does not fail the emotions of the poetess."¹³

Another instance of marvellous simplicity and rare intensity can be cited from "The Suicide":

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead, just dead.

(BKD 28)

Das's lyricism is also conspicuous for its Sappho-like ecstasy and clarity, for its sweep and speed with which her words move. In "Composition" she portrays the condition of a women in a male dominated society in which they, as wives, are simply made to surrender:

What I am able to give
Is only what your wife is qualified
to give
We are all alike,
we women,
in our wrapping of hairless skin.

(BKD 79-80)

Like all confessional poets Kamala's lyricism is graced with a sincerity and fidelity.

Another conspicuous quality of Das's lyricism is the musical effect, produced by the flow of words and repetition of words, phrases, and even clauses. Devindra Kohli perceives "the ceaseless, prolific, spontaneous onrush of words," in her poetry. He also finds her poems registering "the same unhampered, almost liquid flow of words."¹⁴ Even though Das feels that words are inadequate to capture the intensity of feeling, they possess a rhythm which seizes the rhythms of human life. In her poetry she is keen to capture these internal rhythms. For instance in "Glass" (The Old Playhouse and Other Poems), we find arresting jingling sounds produced by internal rhythm:

a woman voice, a woman-smell and I do not
ever brother to tell, I have misplaced a father
somewhere...
And I look for him now everywhere.

(BKD 103)

We can mark how the recurrence of the word woman, consonance of brother and father, and the jingling sounds of "somewhere" and "everywhere" produce a musical effect. According to Dr. Dwivedi, "Kamala Das is an adept in moulding her words and expressions in a highly musical form. She does not delight in lilting cadence alone, but also in producing harsh and grating sounds."¹⁵ We find an

excellent example of harsh sounds as well produced by the frequent use of the letters like "b," "d," and "t" in "The Old Playhouse":

you poured
yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
my poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break sacharine into your tea and
to offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer
begins to pall. I remember the ruder breezes.

(BKD 100)

Das produces music not only by manipulating internal rhythms and subtle use of verbal sounds but also by the time-honoured poetic practice of repetition of words, phrases, and even clauses. She goes on to produce ethereal music by removing rhyme, in the style of Hopkins. In poems like "A Hot Noon in Malabar," "Radha," and "Summer in Calcutta" Das produces musical effect simply by repeating words. She continues this practice in "The Testing of the Sirens," "The Doubt," "Blood," and "Glass" as well. As an instance we can cite following lines from "The Testing of the Sirens" (Summer in Calcutta):

Ah, why does love come to me like pain
again and again and again?

(BKD 59)

Kamala Das also exploits alliteration to produce musical effect. In "Luminal," she repeats the letter "L" to produce musical effect:

Love-lorn,
It is only
wise to let sleep
make holes in memory, even
If it

be the cold and
luminous sleep banked in
the heart of pills, for, he shall not
enter,
your ruthless one,
being human, clumsy
with noise and movement, the soul's mute
arena,
that silent sleep inside your sleep.

(BKD 44)

Alliterations is not the only figure of speech, which Das uses to embellish her poetry. Simile and metaphor also figure as the instruments of heightening the poetic effect. Poems like "Drama," "The Stone Age," and "Forest Fire" embody some of the best specimens of simile. Other poems remarkable for the use of simile are "Annette," "Convicts," "Gino," "Nani," etc. The similes of the "hooded snake," and the "felled tree" in "The Stone Age," remain among the most erotic similes of the confessional poetry:

ask me the flavour of his mouth, ask me
why his hand sways like a hooded snake
before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
a great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts
and sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what
its price...

(BKD 98)

Poems like "Annette," "Mirror Fields," and "Substitutes" are rich in the use of metaphor. In "Substitute," love is made "a swivel door" to emphasize the frequent change of lovers. The opening and closing of doors denote the arrival and departure of lovers. Thus in her characteristic way Das portrays the pathos of a lover's life. She excels in the use of metaphor as well. Her poetry possessed an

astounding variety of metaphors ranging from physical to organic, from natural to spiritual metaphors. In "Composition," she intends to peel off her layers to reach closer to the soul. The metaphor of peeling is in line with "the image of fruit with a thick better rind."¹⁶ Likewise, the unpeeling of the soul is in line with the metaphor of undressing. All three metaphors used by Das are eloquent examples of physical metaphor. For the specimen of organic metaphors, we have to turn to Das's description of the poem as beautiful turbulence in human heart. She believes that "a poem does not ripen for you, you have to ripen for it."¹⁷ Das exploits the metaphorical dimensions of natural objects like the sun and the sea in negative and positive ways. In "The Suicide," "The vortex of the sea" (BKD 27) is a metaphor for death. In "The invitation" it becomes "a metaphor of positive joy."¹⁸ In "The Suicide" "swimming" also assumes metaphorical dimensions in which "every lover becomes a pale-green pond of her childhood in which she used to swim with abandon."¹⁹ With an apparent reference to Carlo, her pen friend and lover, she writes:

The white man who offers
 To help me forget,
 The white man who offers
 Himself as a stiff drink,
 is for me
 To tell the truth
 Only water,
 Only a pale green pond
 Glimmering in the sun.
 In him I swim
 All broken with longing
 In his robust blood I float
 Drying off my tears.

(BKD 29-30)

The poetics of Kamala Das is also remarkable for the use of analogy, irony, metonymy, oxymoron, juxtaposition, dialectical opposition, paradoxical statements, aphoristic phrases, and even suggestiveness. Analogy is one of the chief weapons in Das's poetical armoury. It enables her to underscore partial similarities existing between objects of different nature. Das's range of analogy is wide and varied, covering the natural, domestic, and the human worlds. In "The Suicide," we find the analogy between the lover and water, that eventually emphasizes the elusive nature of love:

Holding you is easy
Clutching at moving water,
I tell you, sea
This is easy
But to hold him for half a day
Was a difficult task.

(BKD 30)

Das uses domestic objects to stress the fragility of love as well as of human body. In "Glass," the brittleness of the object (glass) underscores the fragility of love experience in particular and the fragility of body in general:

I went to him for half an hour as pure woman,
pure misery, fragile glass, breaking, crumbling. The house
was silent in the heat, only its old rafters creaking.
He drew me to him rudely with a lover's haste,
an armful of splinters, designed to hurt and pregnant
with pain.

(BKD 103)

The poem "My Morning Tree," which embodies mild echoes of Robert Frost's "Window Tree" uses analogy of an old hag's fleshless limbs.

Irony is another poetic weapon which Kamala Das uses with exemplary deftness. "No other Indian English poet," writes Sharad Rajimwale, "employed

irony to such devastating effect before Kamala Das – It is canstic, it is Virgilian, it is profoundly demolishing. It evokes both pity and anger, sympathy and ire.”²⁰ The entire body of her poetry is written in an ironical tone. Likewise Devindra Kohli also refers to her cultivation of a “breezy comic irony of Ramanujan.”²¹ In her poems Das treats the subjects of love, happiness, and peace with the instrument of irony. She describes how the natural objects which are likely to yield peace and happiness, eventually bring disaster and destruction. In “The Dance of the Eunuchs,” she finds that the sun with its heat usually suggesting the glow of passion and lust, becomes “the instrument of irony.”²² In “My Morning Tree” Das employs “an almost brutal Irony,”²³ in which the morning flower, instead of bringing life, is shown to bring death:

Morning tree, on your brown bony branch, one day
I shall see a sudden flower, and know at once
That my death is just a flower, a red, red,
Morning flower, and then from behind the cold
Windo-pane, I shall smile my last morning’s smile.²⁴

Examples can be multiplied.

Das’s poetry is replete with ironical and paradoxical situations which project the fate of women in a male-dominated world. According to Niranjana Mohanti, “Kamala Das’s poetry explores the feminine identity through a paradoxical situation.”²⁵ Likewise, Irshad Ahmed, writes about Das’s recurrent use of opposites, oxymoron, antitheses and paradoxes. With the help of these literary devices Das presents before us “a world of doubles, of multiple concomitant existence”²⁶ as we find in the unpublished poem “Feline”:

...There is a sea wailing beneath the sea,
 A sky behind the tent drapes of our familiar sky,
 A rain that rains hard and long within the summer rain
 Another lives in me, I fear, A twin unborn...²⁷

"The recurrent juxtaposition of opposites," writes Ahmed, "takes the reader into the troubled sea of her mind, laden with million contradictions and agonising moments alternating with waves of ambivalence. In this sense a perpetual concommittance is reflected very significantly in her frequent use of oxymorons, antitheses and paradoxes. In fact the very poetic consciousness of Kamala Das is oxymoronic. The figurative device reflects her janus-existence and embodies in a highly concentrated form the 'Private' and multiple public voice of the poet leaving room for inexhaustible possibilities of interpretation."²⁸

There is yet another kind of opposition, the dialectical opposition which forms an important form of Das's poetic strategy. We can find one of its most eloquent examples in "An Apology to Goutama." This device is used to bring out the inherent opposition between the ascetic and the sensual ideals of Goutama and her man. "The opposition," writes Devindra Kohli, "indirectly suggestive of her inescapable acceptance of the way opposite to that of Goutama, in spite of her effort to find in Goutama's arms 'an oasis where memories'/Sad winds do not so much blow...' The opposition is between two kinds of eyes, two kinds of voices, two kinds of faces, rather two modes of living. Even though her lover brings tears and pain of her, and Goutama 'a calm and a smile; yet it is the former who owns her spirityally'"²⁹:

.....while your arms hold
 My woman-form, his hurting arms

Hold my very soul.³⁰

Metonymy is an important poetic tool which enables Kamala Das to reinforce her confessional sensibility that expresses the helplessness of mankind. Literally the term refers simply to a word used as a substitute for something closely associated with it. But as a figure of speech it refers to a word or expression which "substitutes the part for the whole."³¹ For such a great psychoanalyst as Lacan, language itself is a metonymy of the vast spectrum of human desires. Therefore he defines language as the metonymy of signification. Driven by desires, man finds himself in a helpless condition. "He desires because he has been split and forced into an empty world of language; and the same divisive process which was responsible for the birth of desire ensures that there will be only parts, never the whole."³²

In "Composition," Das recreates a world of desire through the description of its parts. Nevertheless, the whole, symbolized by the grandmother and sea "remain tantalizingly inaccessible"³³ and hence elusive:

Love
I no longer need,
with tenderness I am most content,
I have learnt that friendship
cannot endure,
that blood-ties do not satisfy.
And so,
with every interesting man I meet,
be it
a curious editor,
or a poet with a skin yellowed
like antique paper,
a skin older than Jesus Christ,
I must
most deliberately

with up a froth of desire,
a passion to suit the occasion,
I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
autobiography
The only secrets I always
with hold
are that I am so alone
and that I miss my grandmother.

(BKD 79)

"The allusion to the decaying, papery skin of Jesus Christ," writes Ramanathan, "is unforgettable. What is she getting at here? That even he, who was the epitome of love and the epitome of man, cannot satisfy this driving desire; is only one sign among many, a part in the metonymy of signification?"³⁴

Das does not hesitate to make use of aphorism, maxims, and suggestiveness to boost her power of poetic expression. Her poems, especially "Substitute" and "Composition" are storehouses of maxims and Eliotic aphorism. Though Das's poetry lacks the charm of open suggestiveness, there are certain poems which use this device in a subtle way. For instance, "The Maggots" betrays a tone of subtle suggestiveness:

At sunset on the river bank Krishna
loved for her the last time and left.
That right in her husband's arms
Radha felt so dead that he asked
what is wrong, do you mind my kisses,
love, and, she said, no, not at all
but thought, what is it to the corpse
If the maggots nip?

(BKD 46)

According to Dr. A.N. Dwivedi, the poem, "effectively suggests that Radha – no one else than the poetess herself – has lost her true, ideal love for ever, that her

husband's offer of physical love to her is nothing but the 'nipping of the maggots' on her lifeless body ('corpse'). The language of suggestiveness begins to work in Kamala's poetry when she resorts to the Radha-Krishna myth to play it up as a vigorous symbol of genuine love."³⁵

Since confessional poetry is the poetry of changing moods, its flexible poetic form is capable of articulating the varying motions of human psyche. These motions cannot be captured in fixed forms of the poetics of Modernism. Therefore like her American counterparts, Das also opted for vers libre or free verse which is capable of seizing not only emotions but also their intensity. With the help of this form, she is able to say many things in only few phrases. For instance, in "The Dance of the Eunuchs," she recreates not only details of the background but also the details of entire dance and its meaning only in a handful of words and phrases:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling. Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They danced; oh they danced till they bled...

(BKD 60)

Like some other confessional poets, Kamala Das goes on to write prose poems. In "The Swamp," and "Sunset," "Blue Bird," she experiments with this modern form. Dr. A.N. Dwivedi compares these poems with those of Cummings. However, she wrote only a few prose poems. Das also tried her hand at the conventional forms like couplets and quatrains. For instance "The Flag" in Summer in Calcutta is totally cast in couplets. Nevertheless, her couplets are not

of a very high quality. They lack the perfection of Dryden or Pope. Explaining the reasons for the lack of finish, Dr. Dwivedi writes: "As Kamala is not highly educated, she may not possibly know the subtle nuances of a couplet, and it is to her credit that she does not follow the great master in this regard."³⁶ Likewise, she does not follow the great masters of the past, while writing in the stanza form. In the quatrains of "Someone Else's Sons" and "Three P.M." she does not subscribe to the traditional practice of a master like Shelley. As Dr. Dwivedi believes, Kamala Das as an innovator does not rank with G.M. Hopkins or E.E. Cummings. Nevertheless, she is a genuine English poet, who develops an effective confessional technique to poetize the intensity of her emotions in glowing words, phrases, expressions, and above all in images and symbols.

The term imagery connotes many things including simile, metaphor, and word or phrase describing something in an imaginative way. An image is an objective correlative which presents an abstract idea or a feeling in a concrete form. According to Dr. A.N. Dwivedi image-making is a process which "involves the skilful use of metaphors, similes, contrasts." This process "may be equated to 'picture-making' or 'concretization of emotions.'"³⁷ Imagery is closely related to symbolism in as much as it is rooted in the recurrent use of images of a particular type. Kamala Das is among a few Indo-Anglian poets who raise their images to symbolic heights. It is her imagery coupled with symbolism which not only embellishes her poetry but also arouses aesthetic pleasure in the reader. No wonder imagery becomes her principal poetic tool to project the experiences of her female self.

Das's imagery reveals a tremendous profusion and variety. There is an unusual plenty of images drawn from conventional and unconventional sources, from the world of sense, from the human anatomy and human psyche. There are images from the elemental world as well as animal world. According to Nasreen Ayaz, Das exploits "emotions through the help of various images, which are drawn from nature, and from all dimensions of life. The images of the sun, the images of sea, and the image of birds like bats, herons, swallow and crow convey her expression and create a lively and meaningful world."³⁸

Her images usually ventilate not only the sense of rootlessness and despair but also build a surcharged atmosphere. "The images are not limited only to the scenic background, rather these recurrent images present the rootlessness and despair in man-woman relationship. The poetic effect is produced by creating an emotionally charged atmosphere and by the choice of right images."³⁹ Another defining quality of Das's imagery is its symbolic character. She elevates most of her images to symbolic heights. Both images and symbols are blended so intricately that they cannot be separated.

Since Kamala Das is a poet of body, her poetry is dominated by the images of the body, especially of female body. To her, body serves as a spring-board of images. It enables her to develop images quite different in tinge and tone from the images used by the male poets. There is a certain feminine quality in her imagery. Niranjana Mohanti states that Kamala Das is rich with "pervasive anatomical imagery,"⁴⁰ with which she celebrates the body with its nude splendour. In "The Looking Glass," like an anatomist of the female figure, she writes:

Stand nude before the glass with him
 So that he sees himself the stronger one
 And believes it so, and you so much more
 Softer, younger, lovelier... Admit your
 Admiration. Notice the perfection
 Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
 Shower, the sky walk across the bathroom floor.
 Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
 Urinates. All the found details that make
 Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
 Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
 Long hair, the must of sweat between the breasts,
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
 Endless female hungers.⁴¹

Kamala Das performs anatomy not only on female body but also on male body but with a difference. She describes male body with sense of aversion. For instance, in "The Freaks," she images man's mouth as a dark cave of uneven teeth:

He talks, turning a sun-stained cheek to me,
 his mouth a dark cavern where stalactites
 of uneven teeth gleam.

(BKD 42)

Obviously, she cannot find happiness in the company of such ugly males. Sex with such a man brings only bitterness instead of pleasure. She registers her complaint in her well known poem "The Old Playhouse":

You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
 yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
 my poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices.

(BKD 100)

The images of the ugliness of human body and behaviour also surface in "The Stone Age," in which the flavour of the male-mouth is denounced. The male-hand has been imaged as a hooded snake and man as a felled tree. Likewise, in "Convicts" sexual act has been imaged as hacking of the male and female parts as

well as "breaking clods," making a grating sound like the one made by the convicts:

We lay
on bed, glassy eyed, fatigued, just
the toys dead children leave behind,
and we asked each other, what is
the use, what is the bloody use?
That was the only kind of love,
this hacking at each other's parts
like convicts, hacking, breaking clods
at noon.

(BKD 38)

However, the poet does not despise the human body once for all. There are moments, as in "Winter," when Das feels swept off her feet by the charms of the human body, by its smell, tenderness, and warmth especially "on winter evenings," when she is afflicted by cold winds:

It smelt of new rains and of tender
shoots of plants, and its warmth was the warmth
of earth groping for roots... Even my soul,
I thought, must send its roots somewhere,
and I loved his body without shame
on winter evenings as cold winds
chuckled against the window panes.

(BKD 92)

Likewise, Das does not continue to condemn sexual union. The coupling which appears as "breaking clods/At noon" (BKD 38) in "Convicts," and despairing in "The Stone Age," becomes an act of pleasure. Subsequently she feels enamoured of the charms of human body. The perfection of his limbs, his shy walk, even his jerky way of urination poetized in "The Looking Glass," becomes a treat to watch:

Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
shower, the shy walk across the bath room floor,

Dropping towels, and the jerky was he
Urinate. All the found details that make
Him male and your only man.

(The Descendants 25)

Interestingly the poet begins to feel a dire necessity of the "quiet touch" and the "blind kindness" of lips. In "A Relationship," she writes in unequivocal terms:

Yes,
It was my desire that made him male
And beautiful, so that when at last we met
To believe that once I knew not his
Form, his quiet touch, or the blind kindness
Of his lips was hard indeed.⁴²

Bewitched by the charms of male body, the desire of the poet becomes "a loud poster." For years together she tries to locate her mind, as she writes in "Loud Posters,":

Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone I've stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I've put

(The Old Playhouse 47)

Evidently, like a true confessional poet, Kamala Das makes her confessions through physical images, the images of the male and female bodies. Her attitude towards male body is equivocal – both of loving and loathing. Naturally she visualizes sexual union in ambiguous terms of fascination and repulsion.

Like human body, the natural objects like the sun and the sea and the natural phenomena of light and darkness are other important sources of Das's poetic imagery. Among the natural objects, the sun is the biggest source of her imagery. It stands for many things. According to Anisur Rahman, it figures as "an

agent of scorching heat, corruption and lust."⁴³ The scorching heat of the sun not only generates sexual desire but also affects human body. For instance, in "The Freaks" the poet refers to "a sun-stained cheek" (BKD 42), whereas "In Love," the human mouth burning with love is imaged as the burning mouth of the sun:

Of what does the burning mouth
of sun, burning in today's
sky remind me?

(BKD 36)

In "Sepia" the image of sun figures as an agent of destruction, since it is instrumental in drying up the very marrow, the life sustaining vital liquid, inside bones:

It is time to hold anger
like a living sun
and scorch,
scorch to the very marrow
this sad mouthed
human race.

(BKD 3)

One of the most important poems structured on the sun-imagery is "Summer in Calcutta," in which the poet writes about drinking the sensual heat of "The April Sun":

What is this drink but
the April sun squeezed
like an orange in
my glass? I sip the
fire, I drink and drink
again, I am drunk.

(BKD 49)

In "The Conflagration," the image of the sun stands for passion and participation in sex. The two partners in sex are imaged as the two suns hell-bent to burn each other:

We come together like two suns meeting, and each
Raging to burn the other out. He said you are
A forest – conflagration and I, poor forest,
Must burn.

(The Descendants 20)

But in "The Sunshine Cat," the sun does not appear as an agent either of passion or destruction but, according to Dr. Dwivedi as "a companion of the forlorn and the helpless."⁴⁴:

Her husband shut her
In, every morning: locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door.⁴⁵

The image of darkness is a multiple image standing for many things. It is associated with her dark or swarthy, skin which produced in her a sense of physical inferiority. In Das linked darkness with a number of things as well, including passion, ugly features, fear of change, and above all with the creatures of darkness. Devindra Kohli provides us with a marvellous summary of the pervasive images of darkness, used by Das in her important poems. Explaining the association of darkness with passion he writes: "The dancing eunuchs, in 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' have, ironically, dark eyes flashing,' and are themselves 'dark' or 'almost' fair. The lover's mouth in 'The Freaks' is compared to a dark cavern where stalactites of uneven teeth gleam."⁴⁶ The images of darkness appear in some other poems as well. These poems include: "The Fear of the Year," "The End of Spring" "A Hot Noon in Malabar," "An Introduction" and "Marine Drive."

Darkness is also used as a cloak of night, as an image of physical contact, and as the darkness of the womb. It is the darkness of the night that the two partners meet for playing the game of love. In "The Testing of the Sirens," darkness is imaged as the cloak of night which appears as a "procuress":

The night, black-cloaked like a procuress, brought
him to me, willing, light as a shadow,
speaking words of love.

(BKD 58)

Darkness, imaging the darkness of the womb, figures prominently in two poems "Afterwards" and "Jaisurya." In the former Das imagines her son springing from the lonely darkness of the womb, whereas in the second, she experiences the foetus growing and stirring in her womb.

Another important image in Das is the image of the sea, which is related to many things, especially to the poet's moods of anguish and release. In her childhood memory, as she tells us in "Composition," the sea is "the wind's ceaseless whisper in a shell," (BKD 79) which goes on to change into the sound of "the surf breaking on the shore" (BKD 79). Initially sea is the image of her "childish whim," but in the long run it becomes an emblem of greater hungers like love and sex. In "The Suicide," Das images sea as her associate in the act of discarding her body:

I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.
Only the souls know how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.

(BKD 27)

However, in another poem "The Invitation," the sea is transformed in a symbol of positive joy. In "The Invitation," comments Devindra Kohli, "the poet rejects the way of the sea and prefers to 'Shrink or grow, slosh up,/Slide down,' in her own way."⁴⁷ In "The Suicide," too she wants to "quench her thirst for emotional contentment,"⁴⁸ by swimming. Interestingly in the waters of the sea she finds her own image:

O sea,
You generous cow,
You and I are big flops.
We are too sentimental
For our own
Good.

(BKD 30-31)

The variations of sea-imagery also figure in a number of other poems e.g. "The Convicts," "The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road," and "The High Tide." Besides sea-images, Das uses other elemental images, i.e. images drawn from the elemental world of the fire, the earth, the water, and the air and raises them to symbolic heights. According to Irshad Ahmed, Das also introduces the "animal imagery"⁴⁹ to bring out the savage character of the male who appears in his behaviour as the man-beast invading privacy and denying freedom to his female counterpart. "The highly functional animal imagery," writes Ahmed, "is suggestive of the predatory character of the deceiving male always weaving 'a web of bewilderment,' waiting in a bait to catch the gentle 'dove' and like a python to strangle her gradually, reducing her to soulless shape, a mere plaything with no emotion of her own she, the 'dove' he the 'granite' with all their symbolic suggestions. 'With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep' is an auditory

representation of the brutal unconcern of the barbarous male; and 'you stick a finger into my dreaming eye' signifies extreme condition of invaded privacy and harsh denial of individual freedom."⁵⁰ Das goes on to blend this animal imagery with the elemental imagery to provide it a sharper edge. She paints the claws of the man-beast, going deeper into the interiors of her consciousness.

The animal and the elemental images along with the images of sickness and health form, what Irshad Ahmed defines, as the "Iterative Imagery" of Kamala Das. Devindra Kohli also mentions Das's imagery of waste exhaustion and discord. We can find these images in abundance in "Gino." As an instance, we can quote following lines:

I dream of obscene hands
striding up my limbs and of morgues where the night-light
glow on faces shuttered by the souls exit. And
of ward-boys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors
to the x-ray room's interior.
(Oh the clatter of the trolleys, with the dead on them,
as loud as untimely laughter...)
And, of aeroplanes bursting red in the sky.
I should be dreaming his peerless dreams
his dreams of sunlit villas and of fat
half-caste children lovelier than Gods and of
drinking wine in balconies, he had I, ageing
and at peace, all disguise gone from us.

(BKD 56-57)

Interestingly, Kamala Das excels in the use of not only orthodox images of the conventional mould but also unorthodox images of the unusual kind. In a review of Kamala Das, as an eminent literary personality as P. Lal, mentions Das's penchant for the uncommon. "She has," he writes, "uncanny eye for the unusual experience, the off-beat image: In her first poem, 'The Dance of the Eunuchs,' she

speaks of eunuchs dancing 'beneath the fiery gulmohar, with long braids flying dark eyes flashing.'⁵¹ He goes on to quote the following lines from the poem:

All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions.
The sky cracked then, thunder came, and lighting
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice...

(BKD 60)

One of the characteristic quality of Das's imagery is her tendency to use imagery for building up an atmosphere or a background to project the human condition of her contemporary world. With the quick succession of images of one kind, she goes on to portray the burning world in which existence becomes a painful experience. P. Lal gives us a fine description of her method to produce a cumulative effect. "The pungent morbidity of attic dust and lizard-urine-smell," he writes, "pervades this volume." According to him, "it is a terrible inferno world that Kamala Das sees in Calcutta, a city whose patron goddess is Kali."⁵²

However, Das does not create this world of horror for the sake of horror but for the sake of purification. Her intention is purely cathartic. Like a true confessional poet, Das stands for cleansing human consciousness from the darknight experiences of the human existence. According to P. Lal, "she sees with a correct compassion: the horror is cathartic, the disappointment meaningful, and the red sullen faces that sneer and snarl are, ultimately, faces one sees in a cleansing nightmare."⁵³

Kamala Das takes delight in the mythical imagery as well. The most important myth in which she takes delight is invariably the myth of Radha-Krishna

that surfaces in each one of her collections. Das employs this myth when she is utterly dismayed by her bitter experiences and finds no escape-route. In such distressing moment the love of Radha and Krishna is the only way for salvation. In the beginning, she visualized Krishna as a child. During the early years of her married life, she envisioned the infant Krishna sitting on her knee. Later she imagined him as her lover, as she writes in her autobiography:

Free from that last of human bondage, I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up, but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role. I am myself. He said in the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Therefore He dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat cross legged before a lamp reciting mantras in His praise.

(My Story 184-85)

Das goes on to become the lover and devotee of Krishna at one and the same time. "Unrequited in love," writes Dr. Dwivedi, "she becomes Radha seeking the divine love incarnate as Krishna."⁵⁴ In her poem "Radha" she becomes so intimate with her Lord Krishna that she goes to merge her existence with him. In "Ghanshyam," she tells us that Krishna has made her sleeping jungle of life vibrant with the music of love. He has built not only a nest in her heart but also cast his net to ensnare her mind:

Shyam o Ghanshyam
your have like a fisherman cast you net in the narrows
Of my mind
And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like enchanted fish...

(This Savage Rito 19)

For Das, the myth of Krishna virtually becomes a store-house of countless images.

As for Das's symbolism, it cannot be separated from her imagery. Her effort to elevate images to symbolic heights remains one of her most important poetic achievements. Almost all her physical, anatomical, mental, elemental, animal, and mythical images go on to assume symbolic postures. For instance, in her poetry the male body becomes the symbol of corruption and corrosion and the female body, the symbol of beauty. Likewise, the sea becomes a symbol of life and death. Another natural object, the sun, symbolizes lust as well as compassion. On the whole Das's elemental imagery is symbolic in character. It is instrumental in producing a cathartic vision of life.

To reiterate, Kamala Das's poetic craft is innovative and experimental, but effective. As a confessional poet, she has to experiment with new forms and techniques which in the beginning appeared somewhat tantalizing. However, the scholars who were apprehensive of her style and technique soon recognized her poetic talent and tools of expression. They began to acknowledge the primitive energy of her language and emotion, novelty of her form and structure, the wide range of her poetic tools, the profusion and variety of her imagery invested with cathartic overtones and the reaches of her symbolism. As for her literary career, she had poetry in her blood. She began to compose, as early as her school days. Since the publication of her first poem at the age of fifteen, she never looked behind.

Das's poetry, though confessional, is neither free nor formless nor without embellishment. Most of the poems are well structured and are written in a

metaphor which absorbs the merits of both English and the vernacular. Her poetic diction is lyrical, simple, and clear. It is marked with the echoes of the great classics. Nevertheless, it does have the artifice of an Eliot or Auden. These qualities of Das's poetic diction are well marked in such poems as "An Introduction," "The Suicide," "Composition," etc. Das's diction is also remarkable for music of the liquid words and repetitions of words, phrases, and clauses. The most important poems of this category are invariably "Glass" "The Old Playhouse," "Luminal," etc. One of the chief planks of Das's diction is the use of various figures of speech. In her poetry one finds an abundant use of similes and metaphors. Poems like "The Drama," "The Stone Age," and "Forest Fire" embody some of the best specimens of simile, whereas poems like "Composition," "The Suicide," and "The Invitation," incorporate a rich variety of metaphors. Other remarkable tools of Das's poetic diction are analogy, irony, metonymy, juxtaposition, oxymoron, dialectical opposition, paradox, aphorism, and of course suggestiveness. We find in "The Suicide," "Glass," "My Morning Tree," etc. some of the best specimens of analogy. Likewise in "The Dance of the Eunuchs," and "My Morning Tree," we see the instances of her breezy comic as well as brutal irony. For paradoxical situation we have to read "An Apology to Goutama," and for metonymy, "Composition." The examples of aphorism can be gathered from "Substitute," and "Composition." As for Das's use of vers libre "The Dance of the Eunuchs," serves us with a good specimen. Das also wrote prose-poems such as "The Swamp" and "Sunset, Blue Bird." Besides, she tried her hand

at conventional forms of couplet and stanza in poems like "The Flag" and "Someone Else's Sons."

However, the most defining quality of Das's poetry is her imagery. We find a plethora of images drawn from various sources. Her images are physical, natural, mental, animal, elemental, conventional, unconventional, etc. One of the best achievements of her poetic art is the elevation of these images to symbolic heights. The images of the human world occur in "The Looking Glass," "The Freaks," "Convicts," "The Stone Age," "A Relationship," "Loud Posters," etc. The poems embodying images of the sun are "The Freaks," "In Love," "Sepia," "Summer in Calcutta," "The April Sun," "The Conflagration." "The Sunshine Cat," etc. Poems like "The Testing of the Sirens," "Afterwards," and "Jaisurya," incorporate the images of darkness. Sea images can be found in "Composition," "The Invitation," "The Convicts," "The High Trade" etc. Das's poetry abounds in elemental images of sorts. There are animal images as well. We can find the instances of animal imagery in many poems including "Feline." As for the images of waste, exhaustion or discord are concerned, "Gino" is the best example. For mythical images, the most well known source is the Radha-Krishna legend which informs the poems of every collection. Importantly most of the images of Kamala Das do take a symbolic colouring. Thus Das's poetry, though confessional in themes and tone, is not without a well pronounced poetic diction, form, and art.

Chapter 5 – Notes

¹Linda Hess, qtd. Devindra Kohli, Kamala Das (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1975) 25: hereafter cited as Kohli.

²Linda Hess, qtd. Kohli 25-26.

³Kohli 21.

⁴R.K.S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1985, rep. 2002) 677: hereafter cited as Iyengar.

⁵Kamala Das, My Story (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1986) 2: hereafter cited as My Story with paginations.

⁶Iyengar 680.

⁷S. Murali, "Writing in Vacant Ecstasy: Reading Kamala Das," Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry, ed. Iqbal Kaur (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1995) 119: hereafter the article cited as Murali and the book as Kaur.

⁸Kohli 77.

⁹Kohli 104.

¹⁰Kamala Das, The Best of Kamala Das, ed. P.P. Raveendran, with an Introduction "The Ideology of Intimacy" (Kozhikode: Bodhi Publishing House, 1991) 12: hereafter the book cited as BKD with paginations and Introduction as Raveendran.

¹¹A.N. Dwivedi, Kamala Das and Her Poetry (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000) 53: hereafter cited as Dwivedi.

¹²Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 21.

¹³Dwivedi 53.

¹⁴Kohli 66.

¹⁵Dwivedi 56.

¹⁶Kohli 49.

¹⁷Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 37.

¹⁸Kohli 92.

¹⁹Kohli 93.

²⁰Sharad Rajimwale, "Kamala Das – Need for Re-assessment," Kamala Das A Critical Spectrum, eds. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001) 167: hereafter the article cited as Rajimwale and book as A Critical Spectrum.

²¹Kohli 21.

²²Kohli 65.

²³Kohli 77.

²⁴Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 77-78.

²⁵Niranjan Mohanti, "A Feminist Perspective on Kamala Das's Poetry," Kaur 50: hereafter cited as Mohanti.

²⁶Irshad Ahmed, "Reflections on the Mind and Personality of Kamala Das," Kaur 132: hereafter cited as Ahmed.

²⁷Kamala Das, qtd. Kaur 132.

²⁸Ahmed, Kaur 132.

²⁹Kohli 67.

³⁰Kamala Das, qtd. Kohli 68.

³¹Suguna Ramanathan, "Kamala Das's "Composition: A Lacanian Interpretation," Kaur 25: hereafter cited as Ramanathan.

³²Ramanathan, Kaur 25.

- ³³Ramanathan, Kaur 25.
- ³⁴Ramanathan, Kaur 26
- ³⁵Dwivedi 59.
- ³⁶Dwivedi 62.
- ³⁷Dwivedi 65.
- ³⁸Nasreen Ayaz, "Concept of Love in the Poetry of Kamala Das," Kaur 111: hereafter cited as Ayaz.
- ³⁹Ayaz, Kaur 111-112.
- ⁴⁰Mohanty 53.
- ⁴¹Kamala Das, The Descendants (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1967) 25: hereafter cited as The Descendants with paginations.
- ⁴²Kamala Das, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd., 1973) 41: hereafter cited as The Old Playhouse.
- ⁴³Anisur Rahman, Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981) 38: hereafter cited as Rahman.
- ⁴⁴Dwivedi 71.
- ⁴⁵Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy, Tonight This Savage Rite (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1979) 22: hereafter cited as Savage Rite.
- ⁴⁶Kohli 31.
- ⁴⁷Kohli 92.
- ⁴⁸Dwivedi 74.
- ⁴⁹Ahmed, Kaur 132.
- ⁵⁰Ahmed, Kaur 132.

⁵¹P. Lal, "Kamala Das," Kaur 67: hereafter cited as Lal.

⁵²Lal 67-68.

⁵³Lal 68.

⁵⁴Dwivedi 80.

CHAPTER 6

ANNE SEXTON AND KAMALA DAS:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

As the exponents of the confessional poetry, both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das betray a world of identities as well as differences. These identities can be marked in their careers as well as their missions and creative sensibilities, reflected in poetic modes, and poetic techniques. They are so deep-rooted that they establish a permanent kinship between the two poets. As for differences, they are mostly superfluous, being the differences of geography and culture of their respective countries that can influence but only marginally, the type of poetry written in the confessional mode.

Since Sexton and Das are not content to write simply their autobiographies in the confessional mode, but intent upon to create mythologies of their self, they go on to draw the material for their poetic adventure from their own life history. Incidentally, life for both of them was a saga of rebellion, victimization, humiliation, agony, exploitation, disgrace, and abuse. Subsequently, for the most part of their lives, Sexton and Das had to live in the house of pain, enduring the buffets of the world around, autocratic and callous parents, deceitful lovers, tyrannical and cruel husbands, demanding children, scandal mongering neighbours, etc. In this drama of pain, there were some interludes of happiness provided by some loving elderly relatives.

Sexton and Das were born rebels and they had to suffer for the rebellion against their family and society. As rebels, their course of life was parallel to each other. Anne Sexton as a child, according to her biographers, was "demanding" and troublesome:

Often a source of family irritation, she was forever leaping from room to room with one purpose in mind to be noticed. Her parents threw up their hands at Anne's pranks... Constantly defying adult authority, she ate cake in her bedroom, threw rotten apples at the ceiling, and rummaged through Blanche's dresser drawers in secret.¹

Much at the same time, throughout her school years, she was energetic, flirtatious, and vivacious. Nevertheless, she liked to enact the role of the class rogue. At home, her parents denied her the much needed filial love, as she was put in a boarding school:

Each time I give lectures
or gather in the grants
you send me off to boarding school
in training pants.²

Likewise, Das's father was also autocratic and indifferent rather callous to her. He was so busy with his work at the automobile firm that he had no time for his children. As he was not pleased with the manners of his daughter, he got her admitted to a Christian school. "When I was nine, "writes Das in My Story, "my father, coming home on leave, found me to have become too rustic for his liking and immediately admitted me into boarding school run by Roman catholic nuns."³ Furthermore, when he was not satisfied with his daughter's progress in Maths, he got her "married --- as punishment."⁴ For this callousness, Das always had a grudge against her father. But at the same time she also loved her father and was

proud of him. In this way both Sexton and Das were obsessed with their father. There are several poems in which they show this obsession by seeking their lost fathers. Sexton seeks her father not only by writing poems on him but also by creating father figures. In "Cripples and Other Stories," She expresses her ambivalent attitude of hate and worship towards him. She hates her father, for he broke her heart and worships him for he was perfect in his demeanour. Sexton was her father's Electra and felt herself guilty of her father's death. Therefore she began to seek him in various garbs, e.g. in the garb of a doctor, a teacher, and even the Christ or God. The experience of this search is embodied in All My Pretty Ones and Live or Die. Although Das's obsession with the father-figure is not so acute, it is there surfacing in such a tremendous poems as "Glass" included in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems. She writes:

I do not bother
To tell: I've misplaced a father
Somewhere, and I look
For him now everywhere.⁵

Interestingly, Sexton and Das bear an identical grudge against their mother as well. Sexton's complaint was that her mother did not understand her. There were only two occasions when she had some sort of understanding of her daughter. But it was too late:

My mother knew me twice
and then I had to leave her.

(SP 111)

Anne also complained about her "mother's inability to deal with suicide attempts."⁶ Likewise there was a lack of understanding between Das and her

mother. She also blamed her mother for her failure to provide emotional stability and sense of security and to check her suicidal tendencies. In her interview with Iqbal Kaur, she complains of her mother's inability to give her much needed "love and security," her indifference, and her siding with her (Das's) husband when there was some quatter.⁷ However, in spite of their moral inabilities and emotional inadequacies, their mothers had something positive to contribute. As both of them were poets of some stature, they provided their daughters with their poetic legacies, instilling poetic fervour in their sensibilities.

Anyhow in the long run, the two poets adopted an attitude of reconciliation and forgiveness towards their parents. In poem after poem Sexton refers to her sense of guilt felt towards her mother. She invokes this theme in "The Deep Image," "Dreaming the Breast," and in "The Operation." She refers to the breasts, belonging to her mother, in a symbolic way. For her breasts are the source for the life-giving milk as well as of cancer which she received from her mother:

The breasts I knew at midnight
beat like the sea in me now.

(SP 179)

and

In the end they cut off your breasts
and milk poured from them
into the surgeon's hand
and he embraced them
I took them from him
And planted them.

(SP 179)

However, Das did not betray a guilt-consciousness towards her parents. The wounds she received from them healed with the passage time. She developed

a sense of equanimity and forgave everybody responsible for her suffering, as she told Kaur:

I can't but forgive people who caused me to write poetry. If they hadn't hurt me, I wouldn't have been a poet at all and probably the only thing that really matters to me is my poetry, my writing and the right to live as a poet. So far as my husband is concerned, I am grateful to him for the suffering inflicted on me in my youth, for without them I would not have written poetry at all.⁸

To forgive her husband was certainly a brave act on the part of Kamala Das. For it was her husband who was responsible for his suffering, physical and mental, for discomfiture and demeaning of her feminine self. In The Old Playhouse, Das bitterly remembers what her husband had given to her and her sad plight to which she had been reduced by him:

You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juice. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse 1)

Although her marriage was a "flop" and there were "interminable" periods of "silences" between her and the husband, she did not divorce him, for, as she told Iqbal Kaur she was so compassionate and sentimental that she could not "give away even a cat."⁹ She continued to take care of him. She tells Iqbal Kaur about her compassionate attitude about her husband and parents: "I'm a fond wife, I'm a fond daughter."¹⁰ She goes on to add that she continues to obey him in spite of his bad habits:

If my obeying his whims can put him in a good mood, I don't lose anything. I don't want to make an issue out of it because I know it would hurt him. He is used to opening my letters. He is used to taking the telephone and answering it the way he likes to. It has become a habit with him. But I am free I think I am free to give him compassion and I am free to obey his whims. I am free to that extent because I can make life miserable for him if I want to, if I disobey him. But why should I, I have seen him suffer. Last year, he was in coma. I nursed him back to health. His existence is precious to me.¹¹

Sexton's married life was none too happy. Like Kamala Das, she also had tried adultery, developing extra-marital relations. Her husband had to tolerate her affairs. Sexton too was careful not to write poems on his husband's relatives, even though she wrote a lot about her husband, especially in the poems of Eighteen Days Without You. It seems that her husband was not so much a source of unhappiness as her own wayward activities. Nonetheless at the fag end of her life, she asked him for divorce which was granted in November 1973. On October 4, 1974, she died.

As confessional poets, Sexton and Das went on to acknowledge their affairs with a number of lovers, both factual and fictional. Both of them celebrate their extra-marital loves in order to have a complete experience of a full blooded love and explore womanhood in its entirety. Obviously, both of them emerge from this type of love with a sense of bitter disillusionment, followed by an enlightenment revealing the piety of the husband-wife relationship. In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," the poet asks her lover to return to his wife.

I gave you back your heart.
I give you permission -
for the fuse inside her, throbbing
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her

and the burying of her wound -
for the burying of her small red wound a live -

She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

(SP 130-131)

Das too had many affairs so much so that love became a "swivel-door" through which lovers came and went away. As she wrote in "The Invitation," she was without success "for the right one/To come." Ultimately Das became a captive of her own designs, as she writes in *Captive*:

What have
we had, after all, between us but the
womb's bended hunger, the muted whisper
at the core... For years I have run from one
gossamer lane to another, I am
now my own captive.

(*The Descendants* 17)

Even though Sexton and Das were not fond daughters and wives, they were fond mothers. They exhibit sincerity and emotion, while writing about their children. Both the poets depended on their children for emotional stability. Sexton's feelings towards her daughters were a little more poignant. For she realized that there was the same gap of communication between her and her daughters, especially the younger one, Joyce that had spoiled her relations with her mother. In "Pain For a Daughter," Sexton expresses her sense of shock when her daughter refuses to recognize her as mother after her (Sexton's) return from the hospital. The girl becomes terrified and cries for help. This scene breaks the heart of Sexton:

I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries...
Oh my God, help me!
Where a child would have cried Mama!
Where a child would have believed Mama!

(SP 113)

Sexton was intensely attached to Joyce so much so that her illness was sufficient to disturb her and to evoke her consciousness of guilt. In "The Double Image," she writes:

... a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angles spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They rattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucer.

(SP 28)

Indeed Sexton loved her children, but she did not relish her motherhood. Nor did she relish her pregnancy. It is on record that she was quite depressed during her second pregnancy. According to Sexton and Ames, "Anne was unprepared for the responsibility of another infant, an inquisitive two-year-old, a household, and a husband. Her anger and concomitant depression deepened" (Self Portrait 22-23). Naturally after the birth of Joyce she suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to mental hospital.

Das was equally attached to her sons in as much she too became disturbed by their illness. When Monoo, her first son, was stricken with polio, she became quite upset, and cried. The boy was also upset as he asked his mother "Why do you cry, Amma, am I going to die." Das became quite emotional, embracing the boy,

shaking her head vehemently saying "no, no, no" (My Story 114). Describing another attack of illness on him she writes:

After my return from the nursing home, life became difficult for me. My eldest son who had come to be by my side during my illness, fell ill, contracting measles from my little son. Both were delirious with the high fever and I saw on their faces an ominous glaze.

I still hugged to my left side the pain I went to the hospital with, and to eat the sedatives prescribed for me I was not willing. I wanted to remain awake and vigilant at the beside of my son who stared at me with unseeing eyes mottled by red veins.

(My Story 204-205)

In reality Das revelled in her motherhood. The labour-pain which she felt was transformed into shrieks of joy. She felt proud in the act of loving creation. In "Jayasurya" the tinge of blood at childbirth appeared as the arrival of a new dawn. Das felt that she had become the earth-mother. The act of childbirth signified the fulfilment of a woman's life which was no longer an empty container.

In typical voice of an Indian woman, she writes:

When the rain ceased
And the light was gay on our casuarinas leaves
wailing into the light he came,
so fair, a streak of light thrust
into the fading light. They raised him
to me hen,
proud Jaisurya,
my son, sparated from a darkness
that was mine
and in me.
The darkness of rooms
where the old sit,
sharpening words for future use
The darkness of sterile wombs
And that of the miser's pot
with the mildew on his coins.¹²

Besides, children, Sexton and Das found a real emotional anchorage in the loving lap of the grand old ladies of their family. To Sexton, this emotional security was provided by her aunt Anna Ladd Dingley. She was the soft white lady of her heart. While Anna, who lived with them, was alive, she felt secured and happy. But after her death, Sexton's heart was shattered. In poems like "Elizabeth Gone" and "Some Foreign Letters" she goes on to express this unbearable loss. In "Elizabeth Gone" she tries to console by loving her aunt's clothes and by remembering her "apple shape," "the simple crèche of her arms," "the August smells" of her skin (SP 13). In "Some Foreign Letters," her sense of loss becomes all the more acute, as it is overshadowed by a sense of guilt as well. By reading her letters, she projects a living image of the lady of her heart:

I know you forever and you were always old,
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.

(SP 14)

The sense of security and stability which Sexton found with Anna, Das found with her grandmother. In her poems she remembers her with great feeling rather with a sense of poignancy. In My Story she tells us that she spent much time with her. "None had loved me as deeply," she writes, "as my grandmother" (My Story 113). Whenever she fell ill, it always her grandmother who nursed her to health and life so long the old lady was alive. In "Composition" she fondly remembers "lying beside" her, listening to the "ceaseless whisper" of the sea (The

Old Playhouse 3). While indulging in her mental "striptease" and extruding "autobiography," she tells us how much she is missing her grandmother:

The only secrets I always
with hold
are that I am so alone
and that I miss my grandmother.

(The Old Playhouse 5-6)

To the love-lorn poet, she was the only source of love. When the source stopped, the house in which she lived became for her silent and cold; as she writes in "My Grandmother's House":

There is a house now for away where once
I received love... That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon.

(The Old Playhouse 32)

Among other things both Sexton and Das were nostalgic of the days of their psychic suffering, remembering their hospitals, even their room numbers, doctors, and a persons attending on them. Sexton never mentions her hospital as hospital but as the "Summer Hotel" (SP 9) of which she is the queen and "the summer's mild retreat" (SP 52). Her attitude towards her doctor, Dr. Martin, is ambivalent, as she mentions him sometimes as a lover and sometimes as father or even God-figure. In "Flee on Your Donkey," she writes:

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was.

(SP 77)

She had every reason to regard her doctor as a man from the divine world, because it was he who gave her a new lease of life:

I lay there
like an overcoat
that someone had thrown away.
You carried me back in,

(SP 78)

Das also fondly remembered her hospital, her room number "Room No. 565," she writes, "was familiar to me. It was therefore like a homecoming. My doctors were extra kind. They held my hand and talked to me with affection. There was in particular a young, balding one, who smoked Benson and Hedges and scattered their butts on the floor. I liked the smell his thick fingers left on my hands" (My Story 185).

Likewise, Das also felt attached to her doctors and attendants. She became enamoured of Shirley as well as Dr. Pankajam Karunakaran. With her ministrations, the lady doctor brought Das back to life, with her warm touch and gentle voice. She kept death away from Das. She became infatuated with her doctor's figure and behaviour. She wrote:

She was the kindest woman I had ever known. Her patients adored her and when I was well enough to walk about I sat near the hall-window watching the poor patients queeing up with their babies on their hips and the medicine-bottles in their hands. She did not take money from the poor but made them feel that the gratuity was only due to friendship. Every patient felt that she was somebody special.

(My Story 136-137)

The careers of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das were identical not only in digging the skeletons of their relatives and friends but also in their aims and

objectives. They had one and the same aim viz. championing the cause of women. Though at the outset, Sexton wrote poems as a measure of self-therapy but later this therapy was elevated to public-therapy. She made clean breast of everything not because she wanted to purge herself of her obsessive guilt-consciousness but because she wanted to purge the minds of their fellow sufferers as well. Her doctor persuaded her that her poems might prove beneficial to her readers, suffering from mental diseases. Though self-exposure, was something arduous and embarrassing, she went on to make this difficult choice requiring the Jacaston dare devil courage and for which she was subsequently ridiculed by her relatives, friends and teachers alike. The public reaction against this type of poetry was too strong:

At the time everyone said, "You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional: You can't writ this, Anne," and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission.¹³

Besides, John Holmes her first mentor, "expressed his doubts about (the) public confessions."¹⁴ He reminded her of the psychical dangers of going too far in the direction of self-digging. For such things are disastrous not only from the psychical point of view but also from the social point of view. But in spite of warning, she continued to proceed in this direction and ultimately achieved a measure of success:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which twenty years later, seems for less daring.... To day, the remonstrances seem almost quaint.¹⁵

Kamala Das on her part, shared Anne Sexton's aims and objectives. Initially she wrote poetry to explode the volcano simmering within her. But later on, using the might of her pen, she fought not only for her personal liberation but for the liberation of the womankind. "She wanted," writes Iqbal Kaur, "liberation from the stifling social reality which doomed women to immanence liberation from the past, i.e. liberation from the age-old tradition of silence on women's part and for Kamala Das, as for saint, Beuve, writing became liberation."¹⁶

But for championing the cause of women, through personal confessions, she had to pay a heavy price in terms of personal problems and social prestige. She caused great embarrassment to her family that her father "threatened to commit suicide."¹⁷ and her relatives thought that she was a "threat to their respectability."¹⁸ She herself was upset by the rumours about her life generated by her disclosures "I wept like a wounded child," she writes, "for hours rolling on my bed and often took sedatives to put myself to sleep" (*My Story* 166). She was so associated with love and lust that people made phone-calls. Even her relatives began to approach her for sex. However, in spite of disasters, disapprovals and embarrassment she remained as determined as ever. "I compromised," she stated, "with every sentence I wrote and thus I burnt all the boats that would have reached me to security" (*My Story* 220). In her aim of the emancipation of women through self-exposures, Das remained as audacious and relentless as Sexton. Through her writing she disturbed society breaking its complacency and liberated herself and her class. She helped women to realise, what Iqbal Kaur phrases as the "self

worth." She made them bold enough to refuse "victimization and exploitation by men."¹⁹ To quote Das:

I don't even have to speak about the exploitation that all of us suffer at the hands of men. They know when they see me. Probably, I symbolize something for women. I symbolise courage I don't think women in Kerala are any longer victims. It wasn't so about twenty years ago. Almost every woman was a victim and had to submit to tortures mental and physical. But the position has changed now and perhaps in some small way my writings and speeches also have made some difference.²⁰

Coming to the poetry of Sexton and Das, we discover same identities that we find in their careers and poetic missions. However, we should always remember that neither in their careers and mental make-up nor in their poetic exploits they were exact-twins. While Anne was an epitome of the American frivolity Das retained in her waywardness, the tough mentality of a Nayar woman. Much in the same way Sexton deserted her husband but Das, while suffering more from her husband's behaviour, did not think of deserting him. Likewise, their poetry, though betraying similarities of themes, tone, temperament, language, poetic strategy etc. is defined by the separateness of their country, climate, and cultural background. Even though their conceptions of the self, body, love, sex, life, death, and even of poetry, and religious experience strike same chords of the confessional mode, they produce a different music, since their instruments belong to different backgrounds.

Interestingly the poetry of Sexton and Kamala Das is rooted in a common mode and even in a common source, Walt Whitman, the Whitman of "Calamus" poems, celebrating human body in its full splendour. The influence of Whitman

was pervasive. Robert Phillips calls him "an important precursor of confessional poetry."²¹ Almost all confessional poets acknowledged their debt to the American poet. "It was Whitman," writes Phillips, "who taught courage to many moderns – the courage to write about what they are and where they have been."²² Berryman, Roethke, Sexton, Plath, and Ginsberg were his acknowledged fans. Naturally Das also felt his influence. When Iqbal Kaur asked her about the authors who "left an indelible mark on [her] mind,"²³ she promptly told: "Perhaps Walt Whitman did to some extent. In childhood he was the only poet who impressed me."²⁴

Furthermore, Both Sexton and Das acknowledge Sylvia Plath's influence on them. Plath's influence on Das was immense and far-reaching in as much shared Plath's approach to the problems of life and death. In a letter to Newman, Sexton wrote: "We were just two barflies – talking of death – not of creation. What she did in her last poems, is I feel, worth a whole life time."²⁵ Sylvia and her death has been the subject matter of a number of Sexton's poems. No other poets understood the language of death and its intensity to an extent Plath and Sexton did. Das also admired Plath for poetry and personal courage. She tells Iqbal Kaur:

I like tragedies. I like sad stories. Therefore, I enjoyed reading Sylvia Plath's poetry as well as *The Bell Jar*. I admire Sylvia Plath for her courage to kill herself.²⁶

It is no wonder that Das came to share Plath's way of dying. Ramesh Kumar Gupta, in his long article finds echoes of Plath in "The Suicide":

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,

I want to be dead, just dead.

(BKD 28)

Then he goes on to quote the following lines from Plath by way of comparison:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else?
I do it exceptionally well.²⁷

With their poetic culture, cultivated under the influence of Whitman and Plath and many others, Sexton and Das wrote their autobiographies in the manner of a modern poet who "invites us to share in his pursuit of identity to witness the dramatization of the daily events of his experience so closely resembling our own; to be haunted by the imagery of his dreams or the flowing stream of his consciousness; to eavesdrop on relationships with friends and lovers; to absorb the shock of his deep-seated fears and neuroses, even mental instability and madness, and through them to realize the torment of our time."²⁸

Even though Sexton rejected the mythological archetypes in favour of autobiography, she went on creating mythologies of her self with the fusion her personal experience with those borrowed from other sources or woven by her creative imagination. Das's imagination was manifestly mytho-poetic, enabling her to create myths with the blending of fact and fiction. Both of them shared, what the psychologists call, "the leaky ego," and the supreme confidence and determination of a confessional poet to cut the frozen sea within them not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of others as well. In a way both of them rose above their weaknesses to give vent to their experiences so much so that they became known for their exemplary courage. Anne Sexton has been seen as,

having the large, transparent, breakable, and increasingly ragged wings of a dragonfly – her poor, shy, driven life, the blind terror behind her bravado, her deadly increasing pace... her bravery while she lasted.²⁹

Likewise, Das, though possessing the breakable wings of a dragonfly, refused to succumb to the pressures exercised by the world. She remained as uncompromising and relentless in her mission as ever. Iqbal Kaur tells us that she never accepted the conventional norms imposed on womankind by society:

But true to her convictions, Kamala made no compromises with her conventional society's expectations from women. Even though she would get temporarily disturbed by the fact that she was being associated with lust and sex and was misunderstood to be an immoral woman – a corrupter of youth, she was not prepared to accept the society's prescriptions the does and don'ts it prescribed for women she says.³⁰

However, under the veneer of a robust self, Sexton and Das, possessed a leaky self, sick and vulnerable, craving every now and then for existential security. Painfully aware of their weak points both within and without, they attempted to fight their way out of their internal and external quagmire. Sexton's self, wilting under the pressure of an overpowering sense of guilt and loss, always engaged in exorcising the ghosts of her parents, relatives, and friends, and fighting with the external world, began to seek security in the thought of madness and death. The poet who championed the cause of women ultimately became herself tired of being a woman. Sexton gave vent to her tiredness in the poem titled "Consorting with Angels":

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks. (SP 83)

Das's self of a Nalapat Nayar lady, hurt and dwarfed by her husband, bruised and cheated by lovers, scandalized by her neighbours and relatives, and ultimately deformed by the bouts of illness, seemed to lose its grip on life. She also felt tired of her body. She wrote in "Gino":

This body that I wear without joy, owned
By man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with
My darling's impersonal lust, Or, it shall grow grass
And reach large proportion before its end.

(The Old Playhouse 14)

But Das's self differed from Sexton's in case of guilt-consciousness. Nor did she attempt to exorcise the shadowy spectres lurking in the consciousness. Her self was actually the victim of the virile tyranny and masculine hierarchies.

Both Sexton and Das were the incomparable analysts of the leaky self and the supreme singers of love and the human body, especially of the female body with all its beauty, and ugliness. They did not hesitate to reveal the unravelled secrets of the female body, its cycles and its seasons. Sexton wrote many poems on themes relating to the organs and motions of the female body especially her hands, mouth, breasts, legs, and uterus, showing an unprecedented boldness in revealing the most intimate secrets of female physiology. She embodied these revelations in poems like "Housewife," "Menstruation at Forty," "The Breasts," "In Celebration of My Uterus," "The Operation," "The Abortion," etc. "In Housewife," she did not hesitate to reveal the mysteries of the female organs. In "The Furies," she goes on paint the beauty of female organs, along with male organs:

Women have lovely bones, arms, neck, thigh
and I admire them also, but your bones
supersede loveliness. They are the tough
ones that get broken and resist. I just can't
answer for you, only for your bones,
round rulers, round nudgers, round poles,
numb nubkins, the sword of sugar.
I feel the skull. Mr Skeleton, living its
own life in its own skin.

(SP 210)

Along with the description of female mysteries, Sexton unfolds the
nuisances of the touch-game and passion and ecstasy, it generates. In the poem
"The Breasts," she expresses the sensual delight of young girl at the touch of the
hands of her lover:

But your hands found me like an architect.

(SP 123)

The speaker seems alive with the touch of lover's fingers:

I am alive when your fingers are.

(SP 124)

Sexual fulfilment makes the speaker unbalanced:

I am unbalanced.

(SP 124)

The touch of lover's fingers on her breast makes the speaker mad with over
excessive sexual fulfilment:

I am mad the way young girls are mad,
with an offering, an offering...

(SP 124)

Sexton relishes to poetize such unpoetic subjects as operations, abortions,
menstruations and masturbations that have no tinge of beauty in them. She finds

poetry the most unpoetic things. For instance, we can cite a few lines from "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator":

The boys and girls are one tonight.
They unbutton blouses. They unzip flies.
They take off shoes. They turn of the light
The glimmering creatures are full of lies.
They are eating each other. They are overfed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

(SP 137)

Sexton as a poet of love was attentive to the charms of human body. However, she was more attentive to delineate the forbidden subjects of the female anatomy than with the ideal flights of love. Furthermore, her love poems displayed an intense hatred for the male tribe.

Das is no less attentive to the mysteries of human body. While celebrating human body Das is more poetical than Sexton, since she enacts the drama of love through the passionate motions of the body. She talks of "body's wisdom" ("A Relationship"), "wombs blinded hunger" ("Captive"), "the hacking at each other's parts" ("Convicts"), and "[s]tanding nude before the glass," "the jerky way he Urinates," "[t]he warm shock of menstrual blood" and "[e]ndless female hungers" ("The Looking Glass"). Das images are more erotic and concrete than Sexton's. She describes the sexual experience of women with man in a language of openness and candour. For instance, she writes in "The Old Playhouse," about the way a woman reacted to her man:

You were pleased
with my bod's response, its weather, its usual shallow
convulsions. You dribbed spittle into my mouth, you
poured yourself into every nook and cranny, you

embalmed my poor lust with your sweet bitter juices.

(BKD 100)

Though Das is preoccupied with the motions and movements of the female body, she is also aware of the charms of the male body. She does not ignore the peculiarities of human body and the pleasures it offers. Aware of the ugliness of human mouth as dark cavern housing uneven teeth ("The Freaks") and the terrible hand swaying like a hooded snake ("The Stone Age"), she is equally mindful of beguiling graces of the male body. To quote a few lines from "The Looking Glass":

Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the sky walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.

(The Descendants 25)

In spite of her bitter experiences as a wife and a beloved, she does not want a woman to escape from man but she asks her to offer what she has:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. On yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
without him afterward may have to be
faced.

(The Descendants 25)

The celebrations of human body that we find in Sexton and Das are the legacies of their narcissism, which characterize their conception of love. They celebrate their bodies, since they are victims of self love. Self-love has its own

repercussions. It compels them to adopt a rigid attitude towards mankind and drives them to a sense of isolation and alienation. Interestingly while revealing the hidden aspects of female physiology, as well as psychology the windows of their minds are shut off, since, they are unable to know the genuine feelings of their counterparts. Unable to find loving security in their lover's arms, they attempt to find it in the divine arms or in the lap of figurative and literal death.

The conception of love that we find in Sexton and Das is not only narcissistic but also incestuous. Throughout her life Sexton is tormented by an Electra complex. She continues to unfold her obsessive experience to the very end of her life. In "Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman," of 45 Mercy Street, she writes:

I have been divorcing him every since,
going into court with Mother as my witness
and both long dead or not
I am still divorcing him,
Adding up the crimes
of how he came to me,
how he left me.

(SP 253)

Sexton struggled to divorce the memory of her father as well as the protective company of her husband. She intended to find her loving security in the company of Christ or God:

I'm mooring my rowboat
At the dock of the island called God.

(SP 217)

Thus Sexton gets her emotional anchor only in God but in an unprecedented manner.

The elements of narcissism and incest, though not so strong as in Sexton, go on to inform Das's poems as well. She expresses the obsessive intensity of this complex in "The Old Playhouse." Narrating destructive quality of narcissism she writes:

for love is Narcissus at the water's edge haunted
by its lonely face, and, yet is must seek at last
an end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
to shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

(BKD 101)

According to P. Mallikarjuna Rao, narcissism forms the first stage of Kamala's quest for ideal love. In this phase, the lovers are "chained" in self admiration. "It is in the second phase of ideal love that the lovers transgress the boundaries of their egos or narrow selves to merge with each other, as such merger ensures total freedom. The poet beholds such an exemplary relation in the love between Radha and Krishna. She surmises herself as Radha who goes in search of Krishna, the ideal lover, in spite of her marriage."³¹ Like Sexton's, Das's quest for ideal love to be precise, existential love overreaches the barriers of self-love and enters the temple of divine love, however with a marked difference. While Sexton, though more surcharged with a sense of divine ecstasy, does not have the experience of merger, Das has. In her poem "Radha" she writes:

Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You.

(BKD 25)

Kamala finds the fulfilment of love not only in the divine merger but also in her motherhood. She revels not only in child bearing and child rearing but also draws utmost satisfaction in giving birth to children, as we find in her poem "Jayasurya." Sexton though she loved her children does not display such satisfaction. In so far as the human, world is concerned, Sexton and Das find love not from males but from elderly females. Sexton's greatest source of love was her grandmother Anna Ladd Dingley. In Das's case as well, her grandmother was her angel of love.

Coming to incest, so central to Sexton, is not pervasive in the poetry of Das. But it is there in some or the other form. In "Glass," it appears as "a Freudian search for the misplaced father figure."³² The poet unsuccessfully moves from man to man in quest for her true home. Her search is similar to the search of a woman for her eternal lover Krishna. In "Glass" Das gives, what Devindra Kohli calls, "a clinical version."³³ of this search:

With a cheap toy's
indifference I enter other's lives and make of
every trap of lust a temporary home. On me
their strumming fingers may revive the found melodies
of a poet. I give a wrapping to their dreams, I give
a woman-voice, a woman-smell and I do not
every brother to tell, I have misplaced a father
somewhere...
and I look for him now everywhere.

(BKD 103)

In their quest for God or freedom or release, Sexton and Das do not hesitate to follow strange and unorthodox ways – the ways of madness, and death, especially death by suicide. Like most of the confessional poets Sexton renders us a fine

exposition of the manic states. In the poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she gives a moving account of the experience of her depression, mental breakdown, and her hospital days. In "Music Swims Back to Me," she tells us how like a child she is lost in the darkness of the asylum. Even her guide is unable to tell her the way out. She is highly perturbed and restless, as she finds no signposts in the room:

Wait Mister. Which way is home?
They turned the light out
and the dark is moving in the corner.
There are no sign posts in this room,
Four ladies, eighty,
In diapers every one of them.

(SP 12)

and

They lock me in this chair at eight a.m.
and there are no signs to tell the way,
just the radio beating to itself
and the song that remembers
more than I. Oh, la la la,
this music swims back to me
The night I came I danced a circle
And was not afraid.
Mister?

(SP 12)

Das's madhouse-experience does not achieve the poignancy and depth of Sexton's experience. Although she too had suffered from manic depressions and was hospitalized several times, she could not dramatize her experiences in a way Sexton did. Nevertheless she had such a poem as "The Lunatic Asylum," to her credit, in which she gives a fine portrait of its inmates. Referring to the light burning in the asylum, throughout the night, she tells us,

It burns harshly, a sun that
Does not ever set, but her she still burns
The lamps in their skulls, those lights that
The bromides or the electric whiplash
Of every week cannot put out.
those large and hot, insomniac lanterns
under which hazy spectres dance
in the sepulchral ballrooms of their minds.

(BKD 127)

Das goes on to ask the reader not to pity them, for because they are brave:

No, do not pity them, they were
brave enough to escape, yes, to step out
Of the brute regimentals of sane
routing, ignoring the bugles, the wail
Of sirens and the robots stern
bark, hup two three, hup two three,
hup two three...

(BKD 127)

Like most of the confessional poets, both Sexton and Das are great painters of death. Their conceptions of death attain such mystical heights. To them death loses its terrible teeth and assumes the role of a benign liberator from the prison of the flesh. To Sexton death, which she defines as "a thin alley" in the mind (SP 92), appears as lover and in many garbs of an actor with various masks, is a "cherub," and finally even a god. In her poem "For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open," the poet welcomes death as her lover and also as an actor:

Mr. Death, you actor, you have many masks.
Once you were sleek, a kind of Valentino
with my father's bathtub gin in your flask.
With my cinched-in waist and my dumb vertigo
at the crook of your long white arm
and yet you never bent me back, never, never,
into your back guard charm.

(SP 203)

It is no wonder that Sexton sings the hymns of death in the poems of The Death Notebooks. In "Baby" the sixth or the final poem of "The Death Baby" embodied in The Death Notebooks, Sexton hails death as a cherub with milky wings.

Death
you lie in my arms like a cherub.
as heavy as bread dough.
Your milky wings are as still as plastic.
Hair as soft as music.
Hair the color of a harp.
And eyes made of glass,
as brittle as crystal.

(SP 208)

Ultimately Sexton comes to understand the real role of death as a liberator. She realizes that death is not the end of life, but the beginning of a new life:

For death comes to friends, to parents, to sisters. Death comes
with its bagful of pain yet they do not curse the key
they were given to hold.
given to hold

For they open each door and it gives them a new day at the
Yellow window.

(SP 224)

With the realization that death is really a liberator and an usher opening a new door of existence, she begins to love death. But the best form of death envisaged by Sexton, is suicide. In "Clothes" (The Death Notebooks), she expresses her intention to commit suicide and to go to God as a clean one, wearing clean clothes:

Put on a clean shirt.
before you die, some Russian said,
Nothing with drool, please,
no egg spots, no blood,
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean, God,

so I'll try to comply.

(SP 216)

It is only in this purified condition that she wants to proceed towards God:

And I'll take
my painting shirt
washed over and over of course
spotted with every yellow kitchen I've painted.
God, you don't mind if I bring all my kitchens?
They hold the family laughter and the soup.

(SP 216)

In "For the Year of the Insane," Sexton writes of water as an agent of purification

In the mind there is a thin alley called death
and I move through it as
through water
My body is useless,

(SP 92)

Although Das's conception of death as a liberator is neither so profound nor so comprehensive, it is certainly poignant and deep. It has a unique intensity which comes from her ability to give a condensed account of death. The whole gamut of experience poetized by Sexton in Live or Die and The Death Notebooks is condensed in Das's poetic marvel "The Suicide." Even though Das seldom visualizes the seductive and manifold roles of Death to the extent Sexton does, she experiences all those horrors, pangs, and fears which one endures in one's struggle with death. She is as restless as Sexton to throw her body before entering in the vortex of the sea:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.

Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead
Of the two"
I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.

(BKD 27)

For the most part of her life Das was preoccupied with the idea of death. "I have been for years," she writes in My Story," "obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality" (My Story 218). As we have seen in "The Suicide," she prefers death by water, i.e. by drowning in the sea. She writes in My Story:

Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning my self to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in anyway but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements. But rest is a childish fancy, a very minor hunger. The shark's hunger is far greater than mine.

(My Story 215)

In "The Suicide," she contemplates death by drowning in a powerful and moving way. She envisions how her dead body like deadwood would rise the tide, bruising against the coral reefs. Relating her various poses forced upon her, she expresses her tiredness and disgust with life. In the end of the poem she imagines her soul leaving the body and singing the song of freedom:

Lights are moving on the shore.
But I shall not return.
Sea, toss my body back
That he knew how to love.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be free.
Take in my naked soul
That he knew how to hurt

Only the soul knows how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.

(BKD 31)

Indeed Das's intensity of experience whether in celebration of human body or death is unprecedented in the poetic realm of modern literature.

Sexton and Das are not poets of sensationalism, simply exposing the secrets of the female body and celebrating manic states. They are also poets of transcendence which they achieve through lifting their consciousness to religious heights. Significantly, they are not strict adherents of some specific religious tradition, but have a religious temperament which surfaces in their poetry every now and then. Furthermore, they also claim to have religious experience, even though they believe only in an existential religion. Sexton's had the visions of "God or of, Christ, or of the Saints."³⁴ Das also had the vision of Durga on the operating table: "I saw her in red," she writes in My Story, "resplendent in gem-encrusted jewellery. It was with the vision that I became unconscious on the operating table" (My Story 185).

However on the point of religious conviction, there is a world of difference between them. Sexton is more steadfast in her belief than Das who adopted rather a shifting stance in the matter of religious faith.

Obviously both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das have tremendous faith in their Muse. She is the sole companion who never deserts. Even in the days of utter loneliness she is there to console them and to nurse them back to life. As Sexton writes in "Flee on Your Donkey":

Everyone has left me
except my muse,
that good nurse.
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse.

(SP 75)

To Kamala Das as well poetry is her sole companion in loneliness, rather her instrument of overcoming loneliness. In "Anamalai Poems" she goes on to write:

If I had not learnt to write how would
I have written away my loneliness.

(BKD 154)

Like most of the poets, they are convinced of the cathartic and purifying quality of poetry. For Sexton poetry is an effective and powerful form of the individual as well as social therapy. She believes that poetry possesses the power of the Kafkan "ax" to cut the "frozen sea" within an individual.³⁵ Furthermore, poetry milks the unconscious for the images, literary symbols, answers, and insights. The poetic process resembles the process of therapy. Kamala Das blends the cathartic element with her voice of protest. Its volume increases with the increasing intensity of the confessional tone. Prof. S.D. Sharma states, "the more poignant her confessional tone is, the more is her cathartic import."³⁶

Sexton and Das are greatly concerned with the part played by words in the composition of poetry. They are equally concerned with the origin, meaning, and the effects of these words in life. In "Said the Poet to the Analyst," Sexton writes:

My business is words. Words are like labels,
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;
as if words counted like dead bees in the attic,
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.

(SP 17)

Das's treatment of words is, however, more profound and comprehensive than Sexton's. She wrote more poems on the theme of words than Anne Sexton. These poems include "Words," "Convicts," "An Introduction," "Speech," "Words Are Bird," "The Word in Sin," etc. These poems deal with different aspects of the mysteries of the verbal phenomenon. Interestingly her conception of the sources of words seems equivocal. She locates their origin in the silence of the deep sea within. At the same time she visualizes them as growing naturally like leaves. To her words are also the instruments of nuisance. Das is also aware of the inadequacy of words, as she writes in "Words Are Birds":

Words are birds.
Where have they gone to roost.
Wings, tired,
Hiding from the dusk?

(BKD 137)

In expression Sexton and Das use and experiment with the forms conspicuous to confessional art. Discarding the indirect forms of the Modernist poets, they apt for direct forms, especially autobiography. However, in their autobiography, they frequently blend fictional stories to give it a semblance of objectivity and universality. Both in Sexton and Das, there is a fair mixture of fact and fiction. Furthermore, their poetic diction is marked by the use of colloquial language. While Sexton's colloquialism is marked by American slang, Das's language, as she acknowledges (is in "An Introduction," "is half English, half Indian" (BKD 12). In their language, there is a charm of novelty, and a peculiar intensity that comes from felt experience. However, both of them reinforce their

diction with traditional forms and structure and traditional means of embellishment like figures of speech, literary devices, imagery, and symbolism. While writing the history of her leaky self, Sexton uses the devices of structure, lyricism, understatement, irony, metonymy, metaphor, imagery and symbolism. As for structure, she habitually updates old and orthodox structures, making them relevant to her confessional mode. Using freer forms of versification, she reinforces them with the old figures of speech like metonymy to bring out truth, literal as well as emotional.

Sexton also excels in the use of metaphorical devices to structure her confessional outbursts. She invests her utterances with lyrical intensity and music frequently produced by the repetitions of letters, words, phrases, and even sentences. However, the most remarkable part of her poetic diction is the use of sharp, provocative, and crystal images, which provide a haunting quality to her poetry. The imagery of the poems like "Starry Night," "Lament," and "Live" can be considered as the landmark of the poetic art. Furthermore, Sexton uses various forms of irony and understatement to separate her self from the poetic self again to create an illusion of objectivity and universality or to make personal impersonal and to reduce sensationalism. Likewise, with the device of metonymy, Sexton brings out the emotional truth hidden under the cloak of literal truth or facts and figures.

Ostensibly Das is greater artist than Sexton. Since Sexton is one of the originators of confessional poetry, her technique suffers from all the defects of a beginner. But when Das began to write, confessional mode was in its full-fledged

form. Therefore she had to make few experiments. She had only to modify, enlarge, and refine the existing form. Furthermore, she reinforced the confessional mode with the literary devices of the Eliotic school, especially with its imagery and symbolism. Furthermore, she did not hesitate to use figural devices in a more pronounced way. Naturally we find an abundance of such devices as ironical statement and understatement, juxtaposition, oxymoron, dialectical position, analogy, paradox, aphorism, suggestiveness, etc.

However, the area in which Das leaves Sexton far behind is certainly imagery. She draws the rich variety of her imagery from a number of sources natural as well as human. From the natural world, she produces elemental images of the natural powers and the denizens of the natural world – the images of the four elements and the animals, including, the sun, and the sea, the birds like bats, herons, swallow, crow, etc. From the human world, she uses the images of body, death, and various motions of the human and mind. Das employs these images in a number of ways, for creating background as well as for delineating various moods and state of consciousness. Although Sexton's poetry is remarkable for the richness and emotional intensity of her imagery, she hardly equals rich variety and beauty of Das's images. She also surpasses her American counterpart in providing symbolic dimensions to her elemental imagery.

To sum up, Sexton and Das, being confessional poets par excellence, betray a world of identities and differences in their poetic techniques. Identities or to be precise similarities, stem from their common vocation, while differences spring from the difference of their cultural background. Since both of them put their self

on the central stage of their poetic consciousness, their sensibility is personal and private which expresses it through the medium of autobiography. But since this sensibility reveals a new self, half real and half imagined and hitherto buried under the debris of the unconscious, in new garbs, it assumes a mytho-poetic form. In a way the confessional mode of autobiography of self takes the contours of the mythology of self. However, self which Sexton and Das delineate is not a normal self but a leaky self of a female, painfully conscious of her suppression by the male tribe.

Sexton and Das begin the exploration of their leaky self by digging the skeletons of their parents, husbands, relatives, and friends. While Sexton digs these skeletons with an acute sense of overpowering guilt and remorse, Das does it almost without the burden of guilt. In her poetry the element of confession merges with social protest. Furthermore, in Das disillusionment with her family was not so complete as it was with Sexton. Interestingly despaired of their parents and husbands, both of them found solace and emotional security in the love of their children and grandmothers. They also inculcated fond memories of their doctors and friends who helped them to recover from their illness and manic depressions.

In their individual and social aims, both Sexton and Das possessed a common approach i.e. to awaken their respective societies from their complacency by shock treatment to purge them from their psychic and social sickness and win for their female tribe, a place of honour. In their poetic mission they felt inspired by Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath. Sexton and Das engaged themselves in the pursuit of their aims with courage and uncompromising attitude, paying heavy

price in terms of social prestige and personal health even life. In this struggle Das gained an upper hand in comparison to Sexton.

As poets, Sexton and Das were the supreme singers of human body, especially female body, both of its beauty and ugliness. They excelled dealing with the taboo subjects and human body including the mysteries of its private portions, its cycles and seasons. They also dealt with love, especially the narcissistic, or self-destructive love in which Das outscores Sexton. Both of them found love's satiety in the divine embrace. This satiety was more prominent in Sexton than it was in Das. In the portrayal of the incestuous love as well, Sexton surpassed Das.

As confessional poets, Sexton and Das dealt with manic states of depression, psychic imbalances, madness, and even suicidal tendencies. Both of them delineate morbid conditions with profundity and poignancy. But in relation to sheer details, Sexton stole the show. In their creation of the portraits of death, both Sexton and Das were class by themselves. Their poetry embodied many hymns to the savage god i.e. death. For them death was both a liberator and an usher opening doors of the eternal life. Sexton's Live or Die and Das's "Clothes" and "The Suicide" were among the finest poems on death.

Coming to the formal aspect, both Sexton and Das had tremendous faith in the power of poetry as a steadfast friend, cathartic agent, liberator, and agent of transcendence. They were equally concerned with the mysterious roles of words. However, Sexton's treatment of words was not as comprehensive as that of Das who wrote many poems on the subject. In their treatment of free verse, colloquial

language, structural forms, lyricism, figures of speech, poetic devices like imagery and symbolism both Sexton and Das marked a close kinship. While in structural devices Sexton went past Das, in imagery, it was Das who left Sexton far behind. In the end one can say that as confessional poets both Sexton and Das produced excellent poetry which can hardly be surpassed.

Chapter 6 – Notes

¹Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979) 3: hereafter cited as Self-Portrait.

²Anne Sexton, Selected Poems (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 109: hereafter cited as SP with paginations.

³Kamala Das My Story (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1988) 38: hereafter cited as My Story with paginations.

⁴Interview with Iqbal Kaur, "I Needed to Disturb Society....," Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1995) 161: hereafter the interview cited as Interview and book as Perspectives.

⁵Kamala Das, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd., 1973) 22: hereafter cited as The Old Playhouse with paginations.

⁶See Interview with Barbara Kevles, "The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton," Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 8: hereafter the interview cited as Kevles and the book as McClatchy.

⁷Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 161.

⁸Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 162.

⁹Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 162.

¹⁰Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 160.

¹¹Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 160.

¹²Kamala Das, The Best of Kamala Das (New Delhi: Bodhi Books Publishers, 1991) 63: hereafter cited as BKD with paginations.

¹³Anne Sexton, "Interview with Patricea Marx," McClatchy, 39: hereafter cited as Marx.

¹⁴Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 13: hereafter cited as Hall.

¹⁵Maxine Kumin, "How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton," "Introduction" to the Complete Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981) XXXIV: hereafter cited as Kumin.

¹⁶Iqbal Kaur, "Preparatory Note," Perspectives VIII: hereafter cited as Note.

¹⁷Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur VIII.

¹⁸Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur VIII.

¹⁹Kaur, Interview, Perspectives 163..

²⁰Kamala Das, Interview, Perspectives 163.

²¹Robert Phillips, Confessional Poets (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) XV: hereafter cited as Phillips.

²²Phillips 4.

²³Kaur, Interview, 159.

²⁴Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 159.

²⁵Anne Sexton, Self Portrait 274.

²⁶Kamala Das, Kaur 159.

²⁷Ramesh Kumar Gupta, "A Feminist Voice – A Study of Kamala Das's Poems," Kamala Das A Critical Spectrum, eds. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001) 56: hereafter cited as Mittapalli and Piciucco.

²⁸Ralph J. Mills Jr., Cry of the Human Heart: Essays on Contemporary American Poetry (London: Illinois University Press, 1975) 8: hereafter cited as Mills.

²⁹Robert Lowell, "Anne Sexton," McClatchy 71-72: hereafter cited as Lowell.

³⁰Kaur, Note, Kaur IX.

³¹P. Mallikarjuna Rao, "Body and Beyond: Love Poetry of Kamala Das," Mittapalli and Piciucco 59: hereafter cited as Rao.

³²Kohli 112.

³³Kohli 112.

³⁴Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 24.

³⁵See, Kevles, McClatchy 28.

³⁶S.D. Sharma, "Kamala Das's Poetry," Kaur 4: hereafter cited as Sharma.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

A comparative study of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das reveals not only their achievements as confessional poets but also the strength and weakness of the mode in expressing the complexities of the modern life. There is no denying the truth that the confessional mode provides poetic identity to both Sexton and Das. Obviously, they are known for their confessional poetry if not for the shocking disclosures of the most intimate and private experiences of physical type or, to be precise, their experiences as females. In a sense they are involved with the mode in a double bind of mutual grace. While the mode enables them to unburden their guilt-ridden self, they on their part, shape and perfect the mode, taking it to the utmost point, which a poetic mode can achieve. If Sexton and Das realize the heights and depths of their personality, the confessional mode achieves its most glorious form in their poetic exploits.

The flexibility and freedom offered by the confessional form of expression eventually enables Sexton and Das to give voice to the cries of their heart. Sexton, through her poems, relives her childhood guilt her anguish suffered during the hospital days, during which she sometimes imagines herself as the empress of the clinical world, counting the rows of moccasins, and pretending to love her godlike doctor, the prince of all the foxes. Through this very mode she recreates her memories of the white lady of the heart, her angelic grandmother Anna Ladd Dingley. It is this mode which enables her to

ventilate her predicaments as a mother as well, when her child Joyce refuses to recognize her.

The confessional mode enables Sexton to lay bare her guilt-ridden consciousness burdened with a self which held itself responsible for the death of her parents and teacher. Guilt consciousness is a complex emotion which cannot be articulated by an objective or even by ordinary subjective forms. It is an obsessive emotion which continues to afflict one's bruised self for ever. Its shadows continue to hover over one's agonized mind. However, Sexton exorcises these ghosts of memory with the help of her confessions in a poetic form recalling them repeatedly till their fury is silenced and guilt-consciousness is purgated. To her poetry becomes an incantation as well as a vehicle of catharsis. Subsequently, poetry becomes more important than psychiatry. No, wonder, it is not through psychiatry but poetry that Sexton regains her mental equilibrium and confidence in her self.

Furthermore, the confessional mode enables Sexton to deal with her suicidal instinct with which even her parents, her friends, and even doctors failed to deal. Death wish is one of the most complex emotions, which evades expression. It is so ferocious in its operation that it knocks down the protective walls of sanity, emotional control systems, and instrument of self-security. Every form of poetry proves hopelessly inadequate to record minutely and meticulously the struggle for ascendancy between the life and death instincts. However, it is the confessional mode which facilitates Sexton to record how she came to develop suicidal tendencies and to inch towards her savage god.

She describes allurements offered by death that she finds difficult to resist. Her instinct seems to be more overwhelming than Hamlet's, though for different reasons. But the devils of death are challenged by the angels of life that disperse the shadows of the dark night from her soul. She comes to understand the riddles of life and death and goes on to realize that one has to accept the buffets of fortune in the same way as one welcomes the bouquets of life. With this realization, she visualizes the opening of the flower of life inside her, as she finds herself breathing in the beautiful dawn of life. This journey of the self from darkness of death to the light of life can be described in other forms as well. But in those forms it would seldom acquire energy, intensity, and vitality as it gets in the confessional mode.

Interestingly the confessional mode helps Sexton to verbalize not only her personal experiences but also her search for truth and the fulfilment of her social commitments. Her aim as a poet is not merely to ventilate her pent-up feelings but to reveal the emotional truth behind the factual truth or the experiences of her life. While exploring her inner self, she wants to produce the inward look of the psyche, which society scorns or does not want to acknowledge. Sexton actually wants to show the ugly face of the society, its dirt and filth, which are instrumental in causing individual and social sickness. But gradually her crude confessional fury subsides, undergoing a process of sublimation in which psychic exploration assumes the form of an intense religious search. Thus with the help of this mode, Sexton goes on to explore

not only psychic and social territories but also to fathom the oceanic depths of religious consciousness.

Kamala Das also finds in confessional mode the form of her life that can record each and every moment of her turbulent psychic self and poetize the quirks and qualms which quicken the pulse of her life, whether spent in the company of her husband and family or in the embrace of her lovers, real or fictitious. The confessional mode enables her to sing her body's "convulsions," her "skin's lazy hunger," her "body's wisdom," the endless "female hungers" of her lusty sexual life, along with the "musk of sweat between the breasts" and the "warm shock of menstrual blood." It facilitates her to describe the charm and erotic magnetism of her lover's body, the blind "kindness of his lips," his "burning mouth," the "jerky way," he urinates and all those details, which make male, a male indeed.

The confessional mode offers her with a powerful medium to paint her miserable married life of uneasy honeymoons and physical humiliations. It enables her to speak of the hands of lovers like "hooded snake" clasping her pubis and his body like a felled tree slumping against her breasts or his body hacking against her body like the clods of iron. It helps her to voice her sense of humiliation suffered at the hands of her husband, making her cower beneath his monstrous ego and reducing her to a dwarf. With its help, she can condemn her husband as an old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment and can sing of the ugliness of her body as an old playhouse with its lights put out of a body which she wears without joy. Confessional mode provides her with a vehicle

capable of giving vent to her horror of the female body growing gross and reaching large proportions before its end.

Obviously, the confessional mode gives Das an opportunity to develop her creed of love and lust. Through it, she tells her readers, how with the indifference of a cheap toy, she enters the lives of men and lays the traps of lust. Using the mode, she conveys her sense of happiness and contentment, as her life in love becomes like a curled old mongrel. She also expresses the magic strength of her desire, which draws maleness out of a male in whose arms she wants to end her life in peace. Writing in the mode, Sexton does not hesitate to confess the experience of heat generated by passion with her body burning and with lover's limbs appearing like pale and carnivorous plants reaching out for her body. And above all this mode of direct expression enables her to confess her unrequited love and unfulfilled desires.

The confessional mode inspires Das to delineate less exciting experiences depicting the monotony of life and the dance of the eunuchs as well. With the description of the dance of the eunuchs beating their sorry breasts in the hot summer of Calcutta, she poetizes not only their "vacant ecstasy" but also the vacancy of the poet's mind. In confessional strokes she peels off the multiple layers of her self which assumes a number of roles both private and public. Like Sexton, she uses poetry as an instrument of catharsis or mental purgation, for getting rid of her inhibitions and obsessions, which hinder her progress of life. Poetry also becomes a vehicle of religious

experience, which finds its outlet in poems dealing with the mythical love of Radha-Krishna.

Like Sexton, Das finds in the confessional mode, a perfect medium for ventilating his struggles with her suicidal instinct. Das's death-wish is as strong as Sexton's. But she does not treat death in elaborate terms. She rather gives us a succinct expression of her death-wish. She writes under the blinding darkness of night, with death coming like a night-fall. But this death-wish goes to assume a sterner form after the bouts of misery, grief, frustration, failure, frigidity, and coldness all legacies of her troubled life. These experiences produce in her an acute sense of depression, making her fed up with life. She has now only love and simplicity that one gets only after death.

While expressing their inmost experiences in the confessional mode, Sexton and Das go on to shape it into a vehicle, capable of voicing the most secret motions and deepest emotions of human psyche. In their hands this mode becomes a language of thousand moods ranging from the depressions of the disturbed psyche and desperate cries of the human heart to the whisperings of the lover's mind and the spiritual stirrings of the intoxicated soul. The mode, which was previously confined to make confessions and was associated with sensationalism becomes a powerful medium to air the most moving and engaging social concerns. Removing its inherent emotional constraints and psychical perils involving in digging one's psyche, they bring out this mode from its subjective confines and sensationalism to breathe in the open air which partakes the qualities of both the internal and external worlds.

In their effort to expand the horizons of the confessional mode, Sexton and Das experiment with certain technical innovations to make their poetry an instrument of social awakening, private and public catharsis, transcendence, and even religious awakening. In their hands the most private mode assumes the form of a universal mode capable of projecting the consciousness of two countries of different cultural background and attitudes. Rescuing the mode from the regional prejudices, Sexton and Das make confessionalism, a mode of female emancipation and an embodiment of truths, valid to all humanity.

At the outset confessional mode was nothing more than sensational. It was used only for startling, upsetting, and shocking experience to shake human psyche. It is precisely for this purpose that most of the American poets, including Sexton, employed it. They poetized their humiliations, psychic disturbances, and even the secret workings of sex organs. But very soon they came to realize that these experiences were not individual but universal. Man and woman have their quota of emotional suffering, mental diseases, and sexual desires. With this realization confessional poets began to universalize their experience. Sexton too began to write poetry as self-therapy. But when her psychiatrist told her that her poetry might help others to recover from their mental imbalance, she began to write with a social commitment and subsequently became the champion of the female cause. In almost all her poems, especially in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, All My Pretty Ones, Live or Die, and Love Poems, we find an undertone of a wider experience.

Social or universal strains mark the poetry of Kamala Das as well. In her poetic journey, she also proceeds from a purely personal to a social stance. In her poems dealing with sexual experience with the husband or the so-called lovers, she seems content to portray only the most personal. In poems like "The Old Playhouse," where she speaks of her body's responses, its weather and its convulsions; in "The Looking Glass," in which she writes about the jerky way of her lover's urination; and in "Jaisurya" in which she becomes gleefully aware of the soft stirrings of fetus in the womb, she describes only her personal experiences. But when she comes to describe her mental anguish and acute manic depressions, she assumes a representative female voice. In "Glass," like a forlorn woman she seeks for her misplaced father. In "The Suicide," her voice is the voice of all those women who are fed up with life and who seek peace in the lap of the savage god i.e. death. In this way the mode, which she initially used to express her pent up feelings, becomes a powerful medium of inspiration to Malayali as well as other Indian women.

Although confessionalsim in itself is cathartic. But the element of catharsis found in old confessional traditions is rather of a religious kind, aimed at achieving an experience of conversion or spiritual enlightenment or peace of mind with all passions spent. But Sexton moulds the old confessional mode to deal with the new psychological consciousness, revealed by the epoch-making researches of Freud and Jung. She invests her poetic confessionalsim with the latest insights provided by psychology and develops it as a powerful instrument, which can drive away the ghosts of parents and lovers. In many of

her poems like "Cripples and Other Stories," "Pain For a Daughter," "Flee on Your Donkey," she raises the mode to work as a recipe for erasing the memories of unpleasant experiences. In doing so, she develops confessional poetry into a school of literary psychiatry that can exorcise the ghosts infesting the memory lane and causing mental and physical disturbances.

Das also makes a tremendous effort to develop confessional mode as a sort of poetic medicine to treat mental vacancy and even physical ailments. She wrote most of her poetry, when she was undergoing tremendous mental and sexual suffering and, as she confessed several times, an emotional volcano was building inside her. It was only poetry that gave her a legitimate outlet to purge the fiery substance. Otherwise it might have rocked her total being causing enormous physical as well mental damage. Voicing her agony through poems like "Summer in Calcutta," "An Introduction," "My Grandmother's House," "The Suicide," "Gino," "The Dance of the Eunuchs," "Composition," "The Old Playhouse," "Glass," etc., she appeases the fury of the domestic, social, and even literary ghosts infesting her female consciousness. Poetry for her became just another branch of pathology.

Furthermore, both Sexton and Das provide at least a semblance of objectivity to this purely subjective mood. Indeed confessional mode suffers from suffocating solipsistic tendencies, mirroring all forms of reality in the self of the poetic persona. The world vision which it offers is only narcissistic, sans a legitimate sense of the other side or the reality. Such a vision is hopelessly one-sided and incomplete. But in the hands of Sexton and Das, this mode

develops a technique to accommodate the external world in form of concrete imagery and symbolic representations of an objective type. The various forms of embellishment used by these poets bring it closer to the external world.

Anne Sexton in one of her most confessional or personal poems, "You Doctor Mortin" uses objective imagery to clothe her experience of her psychic maladies. She describes her mental asylum as her summer hotel and herself as its queen. She speaks of standing in broken lines waiting for the door to be unlocked, and being ready for counting at the frozen gates of dinner. She also tells us of making moccasins and of loving her doctor who leans above the plastic sky and who is the prince of all foxes. With these images this subjective poem is invested with an objective aroma. In another poem of purely personal nature titled, "Dreaming the Breast," the poet evokes the images of freckled arms, woolly hat, shoes, breasts hanging like two bats, midnight sea, bees, milk, surgeon, etc. to portray a state of guilt-consciousness.

Interestingly, for painting abstract mental states, she employs objective correlatives of the concrete type. Like Emily Dickinson, she treats death as a person, to be precise, as a middle aged lover, belonging to the middle class. In "For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open," she writes of his belly as hanging out like Fatso. She paints him as her comical bean, popping his buttons, and expelling gas. Sexton goes on to describe life as well in concrete terms. In her famous poem "Live," she visualizes life inside her opening like an egg. Thus with the use of objective imagery, Sexton takes confessional poetry to the heights of an unprecedented greatness and transcendence.

Likewise, Das fortifies the confessional mode with physical, animal, and natural imagery which externalizes her mental states of internal suffering. In the poems of Summer in Calcutta, she objectifies her strangled desire caused by her failure in love. In "The Freaks," she describes this desire in form of skin's lazy hungers and heart as an empty cistern. However, the best example of this objectification comes in "The Dance of the Eunuchs," in which Das expresses her distress and disappointment through frenzied dance of the flat-chested eunuchs which produces only a vacant ecstasy. She speaks of jasmines, flashing eyes, the urine of lizards and mice, all objective correlatives of the state of mental vacancy.

Das frequently objectifies her inner restlessness with the image of the sea and its immeasurable world inside. She captures even such an elusive and complicated mental state as suicide with the image of vortex of the sea. In "The Suicide," she tells us of the dead body drifting like wood and striking against coral reefs. Establishing her identity with the sea as two big flops, because of their feeling of too much sentimentality for their own good. Das goes on to objectify life as akin to lights moving on the sea shore. Love is another abstract state which she tries to define in objective terms, images, and symbols. She describes love, caught in a fluid state and involving frequent change of lovers, as a swivel door. Treating love in physical terms, she uses other physical images like womb's blinded hunger, and the muted whisper. But when Das comes to describe spiritual love, she uses most concrete images.

In a remarkable poem "Ghanashyam," she objectifies love as a nest in the harbour of her heart in the sleeping jungle of life.

However, the greatest contribution of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das in shaping and exploiting the potentialities of confessional mode, is undoubtedly their tremendous effort to develop it into a vehicle of transcendental experience, which is the hallmark of great poetry. They mould the so-called sensational mode into a mode that can ventilate the full gamut of the varieties of religious experience. Sexton's tremendous effort to spiritualize confessional form surfaces in poems dealing with Christ and in such collections as The Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing towards God. Likewise, Das comes good with poems dealing with the legend of Radha-Krishna.

In the ten "Psalms," of "O Ye Tongues," incorporated in The Death Notebooks, Sexton admires God, the creator of this world. With the praise of God she experiences enlightenment, as she comes to realize the true nature of death which opens the door of God's abode. However, Sexton's best effort to raise confessional mode to mystic heights is exemplified in The Awful Rowing towards God. The poem expresses her literal sailing towards the island of God. She graphs her journey, which passes through physical, mental, and spiritual stages, in purely confessional terms. Her longings, her yearnings, her prayers, and her admirations all are rendered in strains of genuine confessions. Recreating the quirks of mystical experience, Sexton goes on to make confessional mode an instrument of cosmic experience.

Das also enlarges the scope of confessionalism with the inclusion of poems dealing with the love of Radha and Krishna. These poems are scattered throughout her poetry. She envisions Krishna in many forms, including in the form of her son as well as her lover who, like Koel, has built his nest in her heart. In poems like "Radha-Krishna," "Radha," "Ghanshyam," etc. she elevates confessionalism to transcendental heights for voicing her spiritual love longings, her intense desire to be one with divine her lover. Thus in her hand, the confessional mode, which was a mode of confessions and social protest, becomes a mode of ventilating spiritual experience.

Indeed, both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are confessional poets par-excellence. Through their path-breaking poetry, they reveal the unrevealed, i.e. the truths hitherto unknown to the common man. They describe in the most aesthetic terms the agonies of the humiliated, guilt-ridden, bruised, and buried human psyche and human body. They sing of the female body with its moods and cycles and seasons. Sexton and Das write not merely their biographies but rather create mythologies of their self. With an imaginative mixture of fact and fiction, they develop and perfect the confessional mode, elevating it from a mere instrument of unfolding psychic history, to a literary mode capable of using all tricks of the poetic trade, assuming objective undertones, and ultimately flowering into a vehicle of cosmic and mystic experience.

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